

## GRASPING IN SILENCE

Job – season II, episode 17. You may recall, that last week we left Job – bereft of possessions, family, and health – sitting out on an ash heap in silence with three of his “friends”. This morning we jump ahead 17 chapters to chapter 19 and pick up the story. I’m hoping at least some of you have binge reading the episodes in between. If not, never fear. As one scholar puts it, “Most of Job is fly-over territory.” Well, that’s not quite right but you can get some key parts of the story, by just checking in with the four selections the lectionary provides. As I mentioned last week, the basic structure of Job is something like this:

- Prologue
- The Curse (this is Job’s first extended speech in chapter 3)
- 3 Rounds of Debate with Job’s so-called friends.
- The Summation (this is Job’s final defense)
- The Voice from the Whirlwind (God responds – but not in the way Job, or the reader expects) – we’ll dive into this next week.
- Epilogue – this will be the focus of our final Sunday in Job.

Our passage this morning falls in the middle of the third round of discourse between Job and friends. For several chapters leading up to this speech by Job, he has been debating his friends over their continued belief in a universe where the good are blessed and the wicked punished. The question at the heart of their conversations has been if Job is suffering, what has he done to merit such suffering? The friends are convinced he must have done something – he must have sinned – and if Job would just admit what he’s done, confess, and repent all will be set right.

Job, on the other hand, is determined to maintain his integrity, and unwilling even to confess to something he hasn’t done just to end his ordeal. He parts company with his friends and heads off in a different direction, arguing that if that the rules of the universe are off kilter, and if that’s the case, this is God’s problem, and God needs to be held accountable. Although we are still several chapters ahead of Job’s final defense, he is nonetheless preparing for to meet God in court. Job yearns to lay his case before God, confident, that if only he could do so, he would be vindicated. Trouble is, he can’t find the courthouse, and God is not responding to subpoenas. In fact, God is nowhere to be found:

If I go forward, he is not there;  
or backward, I cannot perceive him;  
on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him;  
I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.

It’s a bizarre reversal of Psalm 139:

Where can I go from your spirit?  
Or where can I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.  
If I take the wings of the morning  
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me fast.  
If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,  
and the light around me become night',  
even the darkness is not dark to you;  
the night is as bright as the day,  
for darkness is as light to you.

Frustrated, despairing, Job finally declares:

If only I could vanish in darkness,  
and thick darkness would cover my face!

And here the book makes a dramatic theological shift. We are no longer arguing about human and sin and guilt, but divine – God's – absence. Have you known divine absence? Have you ever found yourself in the pit, seemingly bereft of God's presence, sitting alone with your questions? "Why is this happening to me?" "Why I am being afflicted in this way?" "What did I do to deserve this?" "Where are you, God?" "Help! I need you. You can show up anytime now."

What we find in Job is a determination to continue to be in conversation with God even when the conversation seems one-sided. In the midst of his suffering, his pleas for justice, his cries of lament, Job refuses to let go of God, grasping even God's silence as he grips a relationship with God he refuses to surrender. As we follow Job's argument throughout the book a shift takes place from speaking about God to speaking directly to God. It's a shift Job's companions never manage. Wendell Berry comments on this subtle shift:

The distinguishing characteristic of absolute despair is silence. There is a world of difference between the person who, believing that there is no use, says so to himself or to no one, and the person who says it aloud to someone else. A person who marks his trail into despair remembers hope — and thus has hope, even if only a little.

Perhaps what we can learn from Job, is that having faith enough to believe the conversation continues, may be the most helpful thing. It may be the only thing. As Old Testament scholar Kathryn Schifferdecker notes:

In lament, the despairing person "says it aloud" to God, and thus holds on to God even in the depths of despair.

If you haven't read all the way through Job, you may not be aware of may have forgotten that but a few chapters ahead of our reading this morning, Job declares:

I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another" (Job 19:25-27a).

It is this faith that grounds Job, that keeps him in conversation, and thus in relationship with God.

When we find ourselves suffering like Job, let us remember that we can continue to converse with God. We can lament. We can cry out. We can mourn. We can shake our fist. We can toss a torrent of rage in God's direction. We can demand that God meet us in court. And God, even in silence, will remain in relationship with us. Another way to translate the final verse of our passage this morning is:

Yet I am not silenced by the darkness, by the thick darkness that covers my face.

In midst of immense suffering, may we not seek or resort to easy answers or quick fixes, or the pious platitudes of friends, grasp even more firmly the God in whom we believe.

AMEN.