

What Wisdom Looks Like  
Job 28:12 - 29:20  
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I'm going to come out and say this. It's confession time. I like the book of Job. By like I don't mean, I'm taking it to the beach with me for my relaxing vacation reading. I like the book of Job because I think it's honest. I like it because when I read it I say, "thank goodness someone else has these questions." There's no denial in the book of Job. There's no settling for easy answers. It's real. Part of me doesn't even care if the author of Job never resolves any of this, I'm just glad this part of life is expressed somewhere and held by our tradition as sacred. But Job does resolve some things. Job doesn't give us simple answers to complex problems, but the book does give us some direction.

Job isn't just some slog through the depths of suffering, the book is trying to debunk bad theology. Some ways of thinking about God are better than others, and Job wants to make sure we can see the flaws in one particular view of God. Once we discard that view, we're on a quest, along with Job, for something better. This week the book will give us a path to follow, next week some ideas.

Job has it all and through no fault of his own, he loses it all. He's on the ash heap for 7 days mourning in silence. Then he curses the day of his birth. He's innocent, and he's suffering. It doesn't make any sense.

Job's friends are offended by Job's curses, and they speak. "Job, if you're suffering, then you're not innocent. It's as simple as that." They kick our man Job while he's down. They couldn't be more irritating or obnoxious in the way they go after him, but their motives are pure. All they want to do is defend God. They believe that God adheres perfectly to our human notions of justice. If someone has done something wrong, something that is against God's will, they get punished. You can't have bad deeds going unpunished, it's just not fair. And if God is in control of everything, and God is all knowing, and something bad happens to you, well, it must mean that you did something wrong. The police don't come to get ya, unless you've done something wrong. And if things are going well for you, you must be doing things right. You earn your punishment. You earn your success. That's fair, that's justice.

And if someone has the guts to say, like Job did, that they are suffering, but they are innocent, then it's your duty as a defender of God, to tell them how wrong they are. That person is saying there's something wrong with God's justice, that there's something wrong with God. Job's friends just can't let him get away with that. This is all Job's friends are trying to do.

We all know there's logic in the view of Job's friends. There is truth in it. Making good choices is a part of the good life. And yet, the author of Job is afraid that we take this view too far. We find this such an easy and comfortable way of seeing the world that we start seeing everything and everyone through this view that "you reap what you sow." We become quick to judge others. When something goes wrong for someone else but doesn't for us, it's hard not to think, "well, you're suffering because you made bad choices, if only you had made choices carefully like me, you'd be just fine." This view is also seductive because we can fool ourselves into thinking that we can control everything with our good actions. If we do everything just right, everything will be perfect, and nothing bad will happen. That's a recipe for allowing worry and a work ethic on steroids to take over our lives and squeeze out all the joy. If our world falls apart then, we're crushed because we couldn't hold it all together. The author of Job wants to suggest

that maybe we aren't in control of everything, and we need a view of God that can take that into account.

So Job's on the ash heap, he's lost everything through no fault of his own, and he says to his friends and to us, "Trust me, from where I'm standing, you need a completely different way of looking at things. I'm not saying there's something wrong with God, I'm saying there's something wrong your understanding of God." The way you are thinking about things makes no sense. I'm not perfect, but I haven't done anything to deserve this. I can't be this bad to be in this sort of suffering, and God knows you aren't that good to have avoided this situation. There has to be another way to think about God.

In saying this, Job hurls angry and pained words at God because of his suffering and the suffering others experience, but Job never loses faith in God. He loses faith in the God of his friends, but that's not the same thing as losing faith in God. I wish we could say that to people who have left the church, "maybe you haven't lost faith in God, you've just lost faith in the God some church or some Christian has given you. We don't believe in that God either. Come, join us. We're on a journey. We're sorting out what we can." Through all of this, Job is determined that God is still present, that God will say he's innocent, and that there's a more helpful way to hold it all together.

Job's determined, but he's searching. The view of his friends is so powerful, so common, that it's difficult for him to imagine something else. It's at this point in Job's search, we have chapter 28, "But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding? The deep says, 'It is not in me,' and the sea says, 'It is not with me.' It cannot be gotten for gold, and silver cannot be weighed out as its price. [But] God understands the way to it, and knows it's place. When God gave to the wind its weight and apportioned out the waters by measure, when God made a decree for the rain, and a way for the thunderbolt; then God saw it and declared it; And God said to humankind, truly the fear of the Lord is wisdom, and to depart from evil is understanding."

"Fearing the Lord is wisdom and departing from evil is understanding." The book says this is part of the puzzle as we're searching. But what's this about? Fearing God sure doesn't sound good. That's sounds like we're right back in the "if you do something wrong, God's gonna smite ya" sort of place. But when the Hebrew word for fear here, "yirah," refers to God, it means respect for, reverence for, it's a general word for piety, or all of our religious practices that remind us that God is present, that God is near. This poem tells us that wisdom can't be purchased, it doesn't have a particular location, but we meet it, we live it as we practice our faith.

Job and his friends want wisdom that once and for all settles their argument, that will explain everything. But this poem in the middle of the book, tells us this religious way of life is wisdom. This is so different. We think of wisdom as knowing everything, being able to fit everything into its logical place. But here, wisdom is a practice. Wisdom is the practice of paying attention to God. Knowing everything isn't going to solve all over our problems. But paying attention to God, keeping our attention to what is holy and loving and good, that's how to hold it together. That focus on the Holy center can allow us to hold the ambiguity and live with the unanswered questions.

And, of course, the practice of paying attention to God, is why we come to church. We come to church because it's important that we gather in community, with other people who are different than us. We need to practice seeing the Christ in the other, in people who are our

friends, in people who are not our friends. We come to church because we need to pray, we need to express gratitude and sorrow, and we need to find that center again. We come to church because we need to hear our great story from the scriptures. We need to hear of grace that is unearned, of hope that restores, of love that serves and resurrects. Practicing this over time, is wisdom.

And as we practice placing the God of our scriptures in the center of our lives, we will be given a particular way of living in the world. Departing from evil is understanding, and the book of Job's view of what evil is connects with the Bible's broadest and deepest themes.

Job offers one final defense against his friends and makes his case before God one more time in chapters 29-31, saying, "O that I were as in the months of old, as in the days when God watched over me; when his lamp shone over my head, and by his light I walked through darkness; ...When I went out to the gate of the city..the voices of the princes were hushed, and their tongues stuck to the roof of their mouths...because I delivered the poor who cried, and the orphan who had no helper. The blessing of the wretched came upon me, and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy. I put on righteousness and it clothed me; my justice was like a robe and a turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy and I championed the cause of the stranger. I broke the fangs of the unrighteous, and made them drop their prey from their teeth."

Job's friends are certain that God is most concerned with the part of justice which has to do with retribution. If you make a mistake, you get punished. But the author of Job asserts that God is concerned with economic justice. God loves the whole of creation and doesn't want the powerful trampling on the poor. Everyone should be treated fairly and should have what they need. We see this concern clearly as God hears the cries of the slaves in Egypt, and through the call of the prophets to care for the poor, the orphan, the widow, the stranger. And in our story from the gospel of Mark for today, we see Jesus acting out the justice of the Realm of God, how the world would be if God were in charge of it, by healing the man with leprosy. Jesus has compassion for the despised one, and touches him, healing him. Jesus doesn't go to those who are doing ok, Jesus goes straight to those who are most vulnerable. Jesus is not concerned about retribution, about what sins may have been involved, Jesus wants this person to be whole again, and part of the community again, and to have enough again.

This doesn't iron everything out for us, but it's a way we can walk. Where's the wisdom we need to figure out the deepest questions of life? Well, maybe wisdom isn't knowledge, but a practice of paying attention to God, to what is holy and sacred and loving. How do we get understanding? Just open your hearts to the vulnerable, to the poor, to the broken. To do this will be a turn from evil, and maybe we'll figure some other things out along the way. Keeping the God of the scriptures at the center of our lives, we'll be sent over and over again, to serve. Not to judge, but to serve. Keeping our hearts open and our hands outstretched, we may just find the understanding we're looking for. Amen.