Sermon

Job and the Whirlwind: A Path to Peace with Creation Amid Suffering

A sermon preached on July 21, 2024 by Zac Klassen
At Bloomingdale Mennonite Church

[SLIDE 1]

This has been a difficult week within the MCEC community with the sudden, unexpected passing of beloved Pastor Kendra Whitfield Ellis on Saturday, July 13th. Across the MCEC community, we have been praying for Kendra's family, her husband Peter and her children Kyana and Ollie, and for Kendra's close colleague and friend Carmen Brubacher, fellow Pastor at Waterloo North Mennonite. We have been praying and sighing, recognizing the depths of grief that come with such a sudden loss. As I entered the space of sermon writing this week in this context, I felt an odd mixture of relief and unsettledness knowing that the scripture texts for today come from the book of Job.

On the one hand, I felt *relief* because of all the books of the bible, Job faces perhaps most honestly the seeming arbitrariness and brutality of human suffering and loss. It is important to be honest in situations of such suffering – to name the brutality – and not seek to foreclose the experience of grief by offering religious platitudes or easy explanations. What is required, first and foremost, in any situation of grief, is simply to sit with those grieving, just as Job's friends sat with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights, not speaking a word – no explanations, no platitudes, just being present to hold the grief together.[1]

[1] This period of silent grief together with a mourner is known in the Jewish tradition as "sitting *shiva*," *shiva* being the Hebrew word for "seven."

On the other hand, however, as I approached sermon writing I also felt *unsettled* about preaching on Job. Partly I felt unsettled because our worship series theme is called "Paths to peace with creation." In this context, the story of God speaking to Job out of a whirlwind is supposed to be read as a means of helping us understand how the wider context of creation and God's power and love in creation can bring peace even in times of despair and loss. While I certainly believe this is something we can learn from the book of Job, perhaps I felt it was too soon to be thinking about any kind of "peace."

So, with a mixture of relief and an unsettled heart, I approached the book of Job and specifically the story of the Voice from the Whirlwind that appears in chapters 38-41; I did so wondering how the texts in Job's story might teach us something about a path to peace with creation, even amid the intense suffering that can be experienced in this world. Before getting into any specifics from the text on the Voice from the whirlwind, it is worthwhile to make some comments on the book of Job as a whole. [SLIDE 2] Biblical commentator Robert Alter has noted that Job should be approached as a grand book of Poetry. The writer of this story was not interested primarily in telling a prose narrative with facts about a man named Job from the land of Uz who experienced much suffering, debated the reasons for that suffering with his friends, met God in a whirlwind, and then experienced a dramatic turn-around in fortune only to live happily ever after. In some ways, if those narrative details of the story were the heart of it, the story would lose its emotional power and depth. After all, the narrative elements of the story really only take up 2 ½ out of Job's 42 chapters and the rest is poetry. Of those basic narrative elements, we are told this much about Job.

[SLIDE 3] Job was blessed to have a big family, was wealthy, and was "blameless and upright and feared God and shunned evil." (1:1) All of these things, says the narrator, made him "greater" than all others around him – that is, until one day when it all began to be taken away and he experienced great suffering and loss. What was the source of this suffering, according to the narrative? [SLIDE 4] It was all due to a wager that took place in a meeting between a heavenly council of sorts. That meeting was between a figure called "The Adversary" and God. The Adversary had taken note of Job while "roaming the earth" (1:7) and had come to the conclusion that the only reason that Job was so upright and blameless was because God had given him all that he could need: wealth, safety, and family; in a word, Job had experienced an overwhelming sense of well-being, God's *shalom,* God's *peace*. Take these away, the adversary surmised, and Job would no longer be righteous – in fact, he would curse God to God's face. "Why not test the theory?" said the Adversary.

As the story goes, God agrees with the Adversary's terms, and the Adversary takes basically all of it away: Job's wealth, safety, and family – *peace* gone in an instant. And then if that wasn't enough, because Job refused to curse God in the midst of the tragic turn of events that had befallen him, the Adversary suggested to God that the ante should be upped – "make Job physically suffer and experience his own personal pain and then he will curse you." And so, God agrees, and the adversary afflicts Job with sores and all manner of physical ailments. As I've explained this initial framing story, I don't know if you've had this thought already, but I think the depiction of God in the first two chapters of Job's story as a God who wagers over the moral integrity of human beings like test subjects is, at minimum,

an unsavory depiction, if it is taken to be a true depiction of God and not merely a clever, customary way to set up a story in ancient Israel.

The remainder of Job casts these more unsavoury narrative framings of Job's suffering as being a result of a "bet" in a different light through the use of poetic expression. The next 38 chapters alternate between Job's speeches, where he defends his integrity and questions God's justice, and the speeches of his three friends, who seek to provide Job with explanations for his suffering. [SLIDE 5] The explanations for Job's suffering offered by his friends tend to center on ideas like: "it's got to be your fault" – "you must have some form of unrighteousness in your life that is the source of your suffering" - "You are being punished for something you did." – "You are ultimately to blame." [SLIDE 6] Take for example, the comments of Eliphaz: "As I have seen, those who plow mischief, those who plant wretchedness, reap it" (4:8). The theology behind this thinking is very commonplace throughout the biblical text – especially in the book of Deuteronomy – and this theology remains today very commonplace and attractive to many.

The basics of this theology are at the heart of a system of divine justice based on reward and punishment. Job likely believed in this theology too, but then he experienced a profound dissonance between his theology and his own experience that led him to roundly refuse this explanation for his suffering. [SLIDE 7] Throughout all of his suffering, Job maintained that he had not done *anything* to deserve this. And yet this leaves him with unanswered questions: why, then, would God allow him to experience such profound suffering? It doesn't make any sense. God must ultimately be responsible and so, if there is anything like divine justice in the universe, it seems to have failed. In chapter after chapter,

Job utters in dramatic poetic voice the suffering he is experiencing, including his desire to have not even been born. Listen to his words [SLIDE 8-9]:

Annul the day that I was born
4 and the night that said, "A man is conceived."
That day, let it be darkness.
Let God above not seek it out,
nor brightness shine upon it.
5 Let darkness, death's shadow, foul it,
let a cloud-mass rest upon it,
let day-gloom dismay it.
6 That night, let murk overtake it.
Let it not join in the days of the year,
let it not enter the number of months.
7 Oh, let that night be barren,
Let it have no song of joy.
8 Let the day-cursers hex it,
those ready to rouse Leviathan.
9 Let its twilight stars go dark.[2]

Job's heart-wrenching poetry expresses powerfully the human experience of suffering, leaving the reader wondering if God can even respond and if God does respond, what possible response would be appropriate.

By the time God does respond, we've made our way through chapter after chapter of poetic utterance by Job and his friends, Job questioning God's justice and Job's friends questioning Job's character. When God finally addresses Job, he *does not* do so through direct address *or* through a logical discussion or explanation, but rather through a storm, often translated as a "whirlwind." Bible translator Robert Alter notes that the poetry of the

[2] Robert Alter's translation

writer of Job reaches a point of great intensity with God's response from the whirlwind.[3] Job's poetic expression of suffering and protest is only matched by God's poetic expression from the whirlwind. But in God's response to Job from the whirlwind, God does not address Job's suffering or the reasons for it. Note, for example, that God doesn't say, "Oh, by the way, your suffering was the result of the Adversary who I let afflict you because of a wager I made with him, and you helped me win that wager." I think it is notable that nowhere in God's response does mention of an Adversary even come up at all. It's as if that whole initial section of the book is no longer necessary, really. God's response to Job instead expresses the unsearchableness and the mystery of the universe's origins, the wildness and power of weather like lightning and wind and snow, and the diversity and complexity of creaturely life on earth. Listen to a few excerpts [SLIDES 10-11]:

> "Where were you when I founded the earth? Tell, if you know understanding. Who fixed its measures, do you know, or who stretched a line upon it? In what were its sockets sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" (vv.4-7)....Have you ever commanded the morning, appointed the dawn to its place, to seize the earth's corners....Have you come into the springs of the sea, in the bottommost deep walked about? Have the gates of death been laid bare to you, and the gates of death's shadow have you seen? (v.12, v.16)....Can you tie the bands of the Pleiades, or loose Orion's reins? Can you bring constellations out in their season, lead the Great Bear and her cubs?" (v.32)

What are we to make of such a response? I'll confess, there is part of me that feels as though God's response is harsh, not to mention seemingly lacking in compassion. Some commentators have used the language here of God bullying Job. Where is the lovingkindness of the God who comforts the creature, who goes above and beyond to

[3] Alter, *The Writings*, 463.

gather the suffering ones into safety, the God who delivers and saves? Is the God who speaks from the whirlwind saying, "Gird your loins like a man," really the God of shalom, well-being, of peace, who leads the beloved by "still waters" to restore their soul? [SLIDE 12]

I confess, I don't have an answer to resolve this tension in the biblical text and its depiction of God. And yet I think there is something of a beautiful truth in God's voice from the storm that we do well to open ourselves to. [SLIDE 13] Robert Alter might just be right that rather than bullying Job, God is exposing "the limits of Job's human perspective, anchored as it is in the restricted compass of human knowledge…"[4] With this in mind, I like to think of God's response to Job as helping him set his suffering within a much wider context. Granted, had God responded out of the whirlwind from the get-go, before Job had plenty of time to protest and question, I don't think it would have reflected a loving God. Job was given space to protest – to scream – to cry – to name with honesty the loss. That space is absolutely essential. But there comes a point, as in every journey with grief, where the anger and the protest lead into a form of acceptance that the world we live in contains a breadth of mysteries whose depths we will never plumb this side of reality. Death and suffering are certainly some of those mysteries and they are mysteries that extend beyond our most personal experiences to the experiences of innumerable others throughout history.

Despite being confident that God, through Christ's death and resurrection, promises to never let us go – to raise us up from death so that we might endure - despite

[4] Alter, *The Writings,* 463.

that confidence, we nonetheless recognize that there are barriers to our knowledge that remain. As St. Paul says, "for now we see as in a mirror dimly…" (1 Cor. 13:12). In the face of Job's protest that God provide some sort of explanation for how the system of divine justice is managed, God reminds Job that finding peace within creation requires him to recognize that he is a creature in a vast creation – important and beloved, but important and beloved alongside a vast creation that is also God's beloved. Job, as the story goes, seems to come to terms with this, [SLIDE 14] acknowledging at the end of the narrative that he had spoken of things that he "did not understand," leading him to "repent in dust and ashes" (42:6). The story is tied up at the end in a manner that is, in my opinion, too neat and tidy. The narrator has God restoring all of Job's fortunes, giving him a new set of sons and daughters, and then having him die after living a long, satisfying life. The very end of Job is, for me, not as satisfying as the moment just before that when Job accepts the limitations of his knowledge and God vindicates Job over against his friends.

As I returned to think about that moment, I was reminded of a teaching within the Jewish tradition often referred to either as the [SLIDE 15] "Two pockets" or "Two truths" teaching.[5] As the story goes, a Rabbi is said to have made a habit of carrying two slips of paper with him, one in each pocket. The one slip of paper said something like "For me the world was created," and the other slip of paper said, "I am dust and ashes." The Rabbi said that he would reach into each pocket as needed. If he was feeling confident and sure of himself, he would reach into the pocket with the paper that said, "I am dust and ashes," and when he was feeling down or discouraged, he would reach into the pocket with the slip

[5] See, for example, this reference: https://medium.com/@progl/two-truths-bb633ba8b1c3

that said, “the world was created for me.” It is perhaps easier at different points of our lives to ignore one of those papers, focusing either on a self-confident sense that we are the center of the universe or, conversely, that we are not worth much at all. The real hard part is living with the tension that both pockets speak the truth of the creator who called us Good and who created us in the divine image, but who also made us from the dust of the earth. Perhaps this might be one lesson to draw from the book of Job.

It might seem that by the time the book of Job comes to a close, God has reminded Job to pay attention to the slip that reminds him that he is dust and ashes. Job, as the beginning of his story had made clear, was “greater than all those around him” when it came to wealth and wellbeing. Whatever else he may have learned, he surely learned that no amount of “greatness” can shield you from the reality that we are dust. But I think we also miss a crucial part to the Job story if we fail to recognize that by the end of Job, God *fully affirms* the rightness of Job’s protests. God affirms Job as a beloved servant and says that in all his protesting and questioning, he had spoken rightly of God, even as he had questioned God’s justice. Job’s friends, on the other hand, the ones who were over-confident in making sense of the tragedies that had befallen Job, God’s “wrath [was] flared against” them. They, you might say, refused to hold together the truths of the two pieces of paper – they were sure that belovedness – that being great and achieving peace within creation – meant avoiding suffering through a predictable system of piety leading to Divine favour. Job, you might say, was willing to concede that there were things he could know – *I am beloved and the world was created for me* – and that there were things he couldn’t know – *I am dust and ashes*.

[SLIDE 16] Friends, many of us have had to and continue to face the realities of deep pain and sorrow. Some of us, due to age or circumstance, have managed to avoid such sorrow for now. But regardless of what season we find ourselves in, regardless of what step along the path we are taking at this moment, we are called to recognize that the path that leads to God's peace and well-being with creation doesn't avoid or escape the realities of suffering and loss but walks through such realities. Indeed, we walk through such realities with the whole chorus of creation as it bears witness to the fact that we are *beloved dust* that God desires to continually transfigure into newness and draw into new life.

As I draw these reflections to a close, I want to invite you now to take out the two sheets of laminated paper that you received when you came in. I invite you to either take one in each hand or lay each one out in front of you. First, I invite you to draw your attention to the slip that says, "the world was created for me." Join me in saying that together: "The World was created for me." Draw your attention now to the other slip that says, "I am dust and ashes." Join me in saying that together: "I am dust and ashes." May the God who speaks in whirlwinds grant us, creatures great and small, peace in our days, so that we may glorify God with our lips. AMEN