

A Naked Intent Toward God

Job 23: 1-9, 16-17 and Mark 10:17-31

There's an old story, more of a parable really, that is attributed to the philosopher Heidegger. It tells of a carpenter who owned a well-equipped workshop. The carpenter never had to worry that he might lack the right tool or the right material for any project he had to do. Until one day when the carpenter is working and his hammer breaks. Despite all the other equipment in the shop, the carpenter's work can't go on because of the loss of that simple hammer. For the first time, the carpenter becomes genuinely aware of the hammer. Its importance and necessity becomes much clearer to him now that he does not have it, than it ever did when he was using it and taking it for granted. The moral of the story is: sometimes the way we learn the most about something is not through the presence of that thing, but through its absence.

The story of Job is like that parable. Only, Job loses something more valuable than a hammer. In a sweeping series of tragic events, Job loses ... everything – his wealth, his family, even his health. All of these losses though, add up to an even greater absence, in Job's mind. Through them, Job suddenly feels the absence of God in his life. Which makes no sense to Job, because he is convinced that he has led a good life. That's why countless people who believe that they have led good lives, yet have suffered great losses, have turned to the Book of Job for an answer to one of humanity's most persistent and haunting questions: Why do bad things happen to good people? Does the fact that a righteous person is no more spared from suffering than a sinner mean that God is not a just God? Or maybe, does it mean that there is just ... no God, and we are on our own in a risky and random universe?

Whether it is the staggering reality of a pandemic that claims millions of lives around the world, or the anguish of a single life—not a statistic but a soulmate—wrenched from your world, these are questions we have all asked ourselves at some time, aren't they? Or, maybe they are questions you have been afraid to ask yourself, because they hold the power to shake your faith to its very foundations. That is the real heart of Job's struggle in this story—not the loss of his wealth, not his physical infirmities, not even, perhaps, his mourning for the lost hopes and dreams of a family that is now no more. The real struggle Job faces is —how does a person hold onto his or her faith in God when life seems to shout that God is absent. Because of all Job's losses, the most disturbing is his loss of trust in a benevolent God when what Job believes to be true about God cannot be reconciled with certain harsh realities of life.

There *is* a lot about suffering in Job. But the Book of Job wasn't written to answer the "WHY" of suffering. Job is about the "HOW" of keeping faith in the face of suffering. And it is about the "WHAT" of faith. What constitutes faithfulness? How much does faith rely on our getting what we feel we deserve from God, and what happens to faith when we don't? Can faith survive when life is stripped of all reasons to believe in a caring, just God?

Before any of Job's calamities strike, there is a scene early in the book that describes a debate between God and Satan. Now, this is not the Satan you're thinking of – no devil horns and

pitchfork. In much the Book of Job the term Satan doesn't refer to the being we associate with that name. Satan is a title that means accuser or adversary. The Satan's job wasn't to tempt people *to do bad* so much as it was to expose the hidden faults that people already harbored within them. He was like supernatural district attorney, bringing charges against people. Satan suggests that the only reason Job is so good is that God has blessed him with everything he could want in life. Take away his blessings and Job would quickly show his true colors and curse God to God's face. God's faith in Job is such that God allows this hypothesis to be put to the test.

The story of Job doesn't begin with, or try to answer, the question of why God allows suffering, but with the questioning of people's motives for trusting God. Can faith be genuine if it is only given as a response to, or in the hope of, rewards we receive from God's hand? Job is called blameless and upright, but would he be so upright without all the blessings he has received? It is the accuser's job to test loyalty and that is what he is given permission to do. After Job's property is destroyed, his fortune is ruined, his family is wiped out, and his own health deteriorates, Job is left with a crisis of faith. All at once, everything that gave Job grounds to believe in God's goodness ... disappears. Suddenly, God seems absent. Job finds himself in a situation much like Heidegger's carpenter, who only fully appreciates his hammer when it is no longer there to serve him.

Had Job's prosperity led him to take God's presence for granted? Now, God seems nowhere to be found. And in the unexpected absence of God, Job has two choices. When Job's wife sees how miserable he is she advises him to just curse God and die. That is one choice we can make. When we are overwhelmed by God's apparent absence, we can give up on God. Or, we can look harder than ever to find God again. That is the choice Job makes.

He says, "Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling." Job wants more than ever to encounter God, but it feels to him as if he is groping in the dark. He says, "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."

In our Gospel reading, Jesus encounters a man similar to Job in that he too is a man blessed with prosperity. Despite his wealth, which many would look at as a sign that he was favored by God, this man only felt God's absence. He asks Jesus what he has to do to experience God's presence. Jesus tells him to go and sell all his possessions. Then come back and follow Jesus. Jesus understood that this rich man needed to discover what Job learned the hard way. That even the most enviable amount of good fortune can't compensate for a poverty in one's companionship with God. And that there are times when the props we lean on for false reassurance that God is with us, have to be lost or abandoned if we are ever to genuinely experience God's nearness.

Has there ever been a time when it seemed to you that God could not be found, no matter where or how hard you looked? Nothing makes us pay attention to our relationship with God more than the fear that God is not there. When the things in life on which we have hung our faith are removed, and God seems to have gone AWOL, can faith survive? So much that we

took for granted has been stripped away from us during this pandemic that you and I may be finding our faith in God being put to a test. When we find ourselves in times such as this, we can either give up believing—if not in God—than at the very least, in the dependability of God’s goodness. Or we can look deeper into our own souls where we hopefully will discover a faith, not only in our assumptions and expectations about God, but a faith that trusts in God’s loving nature, even when we lack understanding of God’s actions.

An anonymous monk who wrote a book called “The Cloud of Unknowing” explained a way of finding a deeper faith in God through the encounter of God’s apparent absence. He wrote: *“You may find a kind of darkness around your mind, as it were a cloud of unknowing. You seem to feel nothing in your will except a naked intent toward God. However hard you try to do something about it, this darkness and this cloud remain between you and God. It seems as though you neither see God by the light of understanding nor feel God in the sweetness of love and affection. But learn to live with this darkness, crying out always to him whom you love.”*

When Job found himself in darkness, he cried out to God, as he never had before. When all else was removed, he clung to a naked intent toward God. Sometimes, like Job, we find ourselves caught in stories of loss and lostness. Like Job, we need to give voice to those stories. Because in sharing those stories, we also share the burden of them, that we otherwise must bear alone. We may discover that in sharing them, we are letting others know that they are not alone, either.

Together, we may even help each other to discover what Job discovered for himself. Which is that the God we thought had abandoned us, is actually present and active in the depths of those very stories. If and when you feel like you are groping in the dark to find God, may your faith take the form of *a naked intent towards God* that leads you to the One whose love for you may sometimes seem elusive - but is never out of reach.

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