

“As Patient Persistent as Job”
Job 23:1-9, 16-17 in conversation with Psalm 139
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She was only seven years old when we buried her. Near to a tree. I know because I remember. I remember because for years afterward, I went there at least once a year. To sit and listen. To listen to the awful sound of silence. The silence of my God – our God – who makes promises that my fifteen year old heart had learned to count on. Promises to love, to protect, to support, to give life.

Not everyone reacted as I did, in the aftermath of the dark hours of the early morning when the tornado whirled carelessly through our neighborhoods. Many saw the good news of the church gathered to embrace the grief of more than one family, fulfilling baptismal promises that make friends out of strangers, enlarging a family to sustain this very kind of loss. I could not deny this even in my grief. The church assembled like it always has when a heart comes to a halt, or a house billows into the sky, or towers topple to the ground.

Yet what I felt on that first morning was a church gathered without its God. What I heard on the Sunday following were hymns of praise that had lost their integrity. Prayers that fell on divine ears that would not hear, or dissolved like mist at the whimsy of the wind. For the first time, I knew that awful sound of silence that met my rage against a God who would let this happen, or who was powerless to change its course, or who perhaps had never been there at all.

There are some who never reach this point in their faith. I envy them. They can affirm that God never gives them more than they can handle. They can find a silver lining to every set back, every loss, every drop of despair. They can confess that God is good all the time. I envy those of you who have that faith.

But for those of us who have shouted into the abyss and not always received a response, for those of us who hold wounds that time can dull but never fully heal, for those of us who have shed some tears that were not wiped away by God, there is Job. Job who suffers every imaginable loss, and rails against God for refusing to do anything about it. Job who contends with that awful sound of silence.

That awful sound of silence that I’ve shared in a hospital waiting room, when a young wife pounded her fists into the wall, crying out why is this happening to me? That awful sound of silence I’ve known as a firefighter, carrying out a grandmother, and her grandbaby from the ashes through a gauntlet of wails to heaven. That awful sound of silence that I’ve seen in a soup line, or outside the psych ward, or at the foot of a child’s bed while the chemo drips again. That awful sound of silence that has met too many wives whose love has turned to fear, too many addicts whose lives have turned to dust, too many children in this city who decide early on that God is just another absentee father who they shouldn’t expect to be coming home anytime soon.

As a pastor, I have tried to fill that awful sound of silence before. Like Job's friends, I've tried to speak it away by offering affirmations about God that don't square with the reality of a sister's suffering. I have offered words from the Psalmist affirming God's ever-presence in the face of a brother who feels nothing but God's absence. "God knows your pain" I might say, "God knows when you sit down and when you rise up. Wherever you are, whoever you are, however you feel, God is with you." Like the Psalmist I have affirmed what I have believed. I have spoken what I believe to be true. I have offered words that do bring comfort to some, only to find myself binding wounds that need to heal *before* they are covered up, protecting God from questions that God does not need to be protected from. I have tried to cover up the sound of silence before.

Job won't be satisfied with answers from his friends. He won't be satisfied with answers supplied by pastors, priests, or psalmists. Job seeks a hearing with God alone. There are some questions that only God can answer. There are some wounds that only God can heal. There are some depths that only God can reach.

Thankfully, Job persists. Job is undeterred. Undeterred by his friends who try to speak away his grief. Undeterred by the affirmations that seem to contradict the complaints that he speaks. Job persists in his integrity, in his complaints, in the voicing of his pain, his longing, and his hope. A longing that he might meet God, reason with God, find God for help.

It's a longing that I know. It's the longing I have every time another storm wounds a family, another accident snuffs out a young life, another city kid takes a bullet for the crime of being poor. It's the longing I have when another person we love gets hit with cancer, or another marriage breaks apart, or another child chooses death over the pain of living. It's a longing I have when in the trying times of life I wonder if I am really on the right track, if my life is doing any good, if I am adding any value to the healing of the world. I long for God to come and contend with us, armed with promises that God has already given. I long for God to come and give us a hearing so we can argue for the healing, and the justice, and the peace that God has promised. I long for God to come and be with us.

It takes Job a long time and a lot of complaining before the silence is broken. It takes Job a long time to get some kind of an answer to the questions of his heart. God does not operate on the kind of time schedule that I prefer. The Israelite slaves spend 40 years in their wilderness before God brings them home. The exiles spend 70 years in Babylon before God brings them home. The apostle Paul waits a lifetime for Jesus to come back and finish what he started. It could be that some of us spend a lifetime crying out to God to come and be present to the pain, come and be present to the grief, come and be present to the injustice around us. It could be that we'll never understand where God is when the cancer comes back, when the marriage splits up, when a little girl goes to sleep in a storm that won't let her wake up again. God does not operate on my preferred schedule.

But sometimes, God does show up. Or maybe God is always there, always here and we catch a glimpse, feel an embrace that makes it seem as though God has finally arrived. Maybe God's not on our timeline, not on our schedule, but in those times we know God is there – the signs are all around us. We pray for peace, and we struggle for peace, and we protest for peace,

and we beg God to help us love our enemies instead of just killing them, and it feels as though God does hear that cry, that people all over the world are moved to act. I pray at the deathbed of someone we love - pray for healing that surpasses all understanding, and as this person departs, gently into peace, I know as I stand in that holy space between life and death that it must be God who takes her there. I squabble with God, wondering where God is in a country that lets its children die in drug-ridden streets, and just when my faith is tested to the limits, I see new hopes when churches and mosques, and synagogues come together to start talking and plotting and organizing. When God shows up like that, the silence no longer seems so awful. It feels more like a silent trumpet, announcing that God is near.

And it's not just me. I know the gang leader who got down on his knees in the toilet water of a courtroom stall asking God to turn his life around – now he's teaching boys how to be men without getting in the drug game. I know the woman who thought her life would end with her first marriage – she's never been stronger. I know the prescription drug addict who didn't think she'd live to see another year – she's found her faith again. I know people who have agonized over the choices of their children, children who have agonized over the choices of their parents, people who have longed for an end to the pain. And there again and again, God has shown up.

Sometimes the affirmations of the Psalmist *are* true and we *can* trumpet those affirmations from the hilltops. “Wonderful are your works!” “I praise you!” It doesn't make the losses that we experience any less deep. It doesn't erase the questions that fester around many wounds, the absence that we sometimes feel, the doubt that always tags along in the wake of tragedy or injustice. It doesn't mean that every time we ask God for what we want we'll necessarily get it. It doesn't mean that the celebration of Psalm 139 trumps the longing of Job 23.

It only means that our faith is big enough for both. Big enough to let the awful sound of silence stand in the wake of losses that are not just. Big enough to celebrate the God who discerns our thoughts from far away. Our faith is big enough to hold both. Our faith is big enough for the mystery of love *and* loss, of suffering *and* redemption, of justice *and* injustice, big enough for those realities in our lives to be voiced from where we stand.

Job has been praised for his patience in the past. But that's not really what I see most clearly in Job. I think he ought to be praised for his persistence. Job holds the affirmations of his God in one hand and his complaint in the other. Both are rooted deeply in his faith. He persists in both.

Thank God Job is there, waiting for us when we need him. The fact that he's right here in our sacred book means our faith is big enough for life – life as it comes to us in joy, in disappointments, in struggle, in grace.