

*The three 'friends' speak.* A sermon preached as part of a series on the book of Job, January 28, 2018 at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC by Rev. Herb Hilder

Lessons: JOB 4:2-9, 8:1-6

We left Job in a deeply depressed mood.

Job despises the day he was born

He hates the thought that he lived after being born.

Over and above that, the silence of God is driving him up the wall.

So Job does not hold back – he literally bears his soul, his heart and emotions.

This morning's readings draw from the portion of Job that stretches through several chapters – the accusations of three 'friends', Job's wife and then Elihu and Job's response to those accusations.

There are three cycles of accusations – each increasing in caustic comments

And three responses by Job.

All is recounted in poetic form – try not to be intimidated by that.

Poetry tends to make us slow down and concentrate better and what we are reading.

Poetry cannot be rushed through or speed read

And poetry is often much richer in imagery and memorable turns of phrase than narrative.

Each of the interactions,  
 Which become down right finger pointing tirades  
 between Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar and Job (the  
 Blake engraving on the bulletin cover)  
 Deserve several messages or sermons.  
 For there is so much here.  
 We can only give the dialogue turned tirades one  
 message in this series.  
 I would therefore encourage you to prayerfully read  
 and reflect on these chapters.  
 Why? For there is much here about how people saw  
 God and punishment then and how many see God  
 and punishment now

Too many still see all human suffering,  
 Pain,  
 Affliction as solely the result of the particular  
 individual's bad behavior

*The righteous will prosper and the wicked will suffer.*  
 The oft added corollary is that

*If someone suffers they are wicked.  
 If someone prospers, they are righteous*

Righteous – refers to behavior that pleases God and  
 brings his favour.

In some cultures and religious traditions this is  
 found almost exclusively in moral behavior,  
 While in others, in meticulous perfection – works!!

Prosper –refers to anything perceived to be a  
 blessing or benefit in one's experience.

It includes material prosperity,

Many children and grandchildren and good health and success in one's endeavours.

Wicked – in this formula is used to identify behavior that is displeasing to God or unacceptable in society or both

It may even include failure to behave in certain ways or failure to participate in necessary rituals.

Suffer – general category of negative experiences in life – ill health (for oneself or one's family) crop failure, nothing working out right, people taking advantage or threatening each other.

Think Psalms of Lament!

Throughout the book of Job then, the more strident and nasty the words of the friends in regard to Job and his situation,  
The more determined Job becomes NOT TO CURSE GOD AND DIE

Job's position – I HAVE DONE NOTHING WRONG TO DESERVE WHAT I AM EXPERIENCING.

Job never veers off that stance

What an incredible individual is Job

Back to this morning's story and the scriptures Karenza read.

We are introduced to the three friends at the end of chapter 2

They are friends of Job the story tells us

They hear of all what has happened and so they agree to go and **console and comfort Job (2:11)**

Noble and proper thing to do.

Go to be someone's tomorrow

Sit and just be there.

Not speak platitudes Job's condition

Rather, to recognize Job's pain,

His vulnerability.

To take his crying out to God for what it is – a  
crying out to God – with a non-judgmental ear!

To **console and comfort** – not to theologize about  
the words he has just spoken in chapter 3 or may  
speak in the future.

Text tells us, as the friends see Job, they do not  
recognize him

His head is shaved,

His face is swollen,

He's scabbed over all with running sores

He keeps squirming from one position to another

He does not feel comfortable sitting on the ground,

And he is so miserable lying down,

His nights are full of groans and restlessness

As the sun rises, its searing rays burn his skin as  
he sits in the trash dump of the city.

Not even his own wife brings him relief.

The man is tormented – physically and broken in  
spirit.

If anyone on earth ever needed the comfort of a  
friend – Job did!

Those of you who have experienced  
personally Job like situations or have family

members or friends who have experienced Job like situations--

And let's be clear there is no sliding scale of more or less Job like —

What is Job like to one person may not be to another, but that does not change perception of the individual experiencing the Job like situation.

To them it is Job like and that is all that matters.

Katharine will tell you that when she was in hospital a couple of years ago --the most effective and most appreciated visitors were those who were sensitive to her situation,

Visited only for a short time,

Brought one piece of cheery or encouraging news,

Perhaps handed her something just out of reach on her table

Maybe moved a pillow so she was more comfortable had a prayer and then left.

I remember years ago, being called to visit a parishioner whose mother had suddenly died in Malawi.

When I arrived one of the elders was making tea,

As the trip to Malawi would be an extended one,

This elder had already further arranged child care

for this grieving woman's children and meals for the family — she was a true Martha by the way!!

That is an example of good comfort and consoling.

On the other hand, saying to the person in the Job like situation things like -you should see so and so down the hall – he/she is in much worse shape than you.

Or, it's not so bad

Or you must really like to be sick – are examples of bad comfort and consoling!!!!

As the three friends did not recognize Job when they saw him – touch point for us – in modern day Job like situations – individuals do not look their best.

And they feel vulnerable, fragile and for the most part anxious about a whole host of things – family, the future, maybe a job, maybe a pet at the house, maybe the house itself – unoccupied

At such times, sheer presence and silence really is golden.

Unfortunately – the 3 friends move beyond their mandate to **console and comfort** Job. They open their mouths and what they say neither consoles nor comforts Job

By the end of the latter chapters in Job – they are on full scale attack mode.

You have brought this on yourself Job.

You have or your family has done something wrong – and you are bearing the results

The friends assume a stance that they are wise than Job,

Know more about God  
And are spiritually superior.

Sadly, that is still more or less an all too common pose for healthy people to take when dealing with a sick person in despair.

Consider for a moment Eliphaz' s opening words to Job

Here's Job – covered in sores,

Having poured his heart out to God

And what is the first thing Eliphaz says

**“If one ventures a word with you, will you be offended?**

**But who can keep from speaking?(vs2)**

You just sense that Eliphaz' s possible intent of consoling Job is going to go sideways.

I can just visualize Eliphaz just waiting to make comment on Job' s lament of chapter 3

Just wanting to point out inconsistencies or wrong thinking as it relates to God.

Rather than listening to Job,

Looking at him as a person who is in despair and suffering,

Remembering why he and the other two came to do – console and comfort

Eliphaz has assumed he knows better and he can hardly wait to convey to a suffering Job his opinions – solicited or not!

It does not get better with round 2 and round 3 of the accusations of Eliphaz to Job.

The second time around Eliphaz makes no allowances for the fact that Job speak out of pain and bereavement.

Eliphaz accuses Job of arrogance, born out of immaturity.

Job, you just have not lived long enough to be an expert on the fairness of God's world and to claim that you are as wise as us. Give up this unseemly self-righteousness of yours

By the end of his dialogue with Job, Eliphaz's sole purpose has become to shame Job into silence!

The second reading from Job is friend #2 – Bildad's opening reaction to Job's lament and condition.

He's heard Eliphaz's words and Job's response.

Rather than taking what I believe would have been the 'high road' – kept silent!

Bildad wades in with even more accusatory remarks

**“How long will you say these things,  
and the words of your mouth be a great  
wind? (8:2)**

Great 'friends' eh?

Job has essentially been dismissed as a windbag!!

In these verses read from chapter 8 and what follows in Bildad's arguments is essentially this – Job, try to understand that this is not all about you. I

am working on three propositions

#1 God is all powerful

#2 God is completely good and fair

#3 You are a good man Job.

If #1 and #2 are right,

Then I question your innocence Job.

You or your family must have done SOMETHING wrong to bring this on yourself

Job, stop considering your personal fate as more important than what happens to all the other people on this planet

How dare you disturb the “order of things” by asking your unsettling questions?

Order of things – read *the retribution principle*

*The righteous prosper and the wicked suffer*

*If someone suffers they are wicked and if someone prospers, they are righteous*

Unfortunately this principle ignores one of the questions with which Job wrestles

**The well-deserved misery of the wicked does NOT balance the undeserved suffering of the innocent at God's hand.**

The three friends and Job's wife and Elihu simply cannot move from that unquestioning allegiance to the retribution principle – traditional belief.

The rounds of accusations and Job's response to each confront readers today with the same unsettling questions:

- ❖ Where IS God in the disorienting, great despair times?
- ❖ What is the purpose of such times in our lives or in the lives of loved ones and family?
- ❖ Is God silent? If he is not, then why does he not intervene or speak clearly to us in our situation?
- ❖ Does every bit of human suffering – again our own or that of our loves ones and friends – boil down to punishment for bad behavior – righteous behavior=reward

We are not given the answers to these and other related questions in Job.

Job, if you have not yet realized it is not an answer book to some of life's most challenging questions! God does not and will not answer Job's "whys". God will not answer our whys either!

What the dialogues DO and I think this is one of the strengths of the book and why Job needs to be read and considered,

Reflected and talked about by every generation of God's people is that Job *confronts us with life's disturbing questions.*

*The book of Job forces us to think about those questions in the light of our own experiences.*

*Further, I think Job –particularly in this section – keep us from mouthing simplistic solutions to suffering, affliction and pain!*

For have not we ourselves heard simplistic solutions or been subject to them or regretfully said them to individuals in Job like situations?

Permit me to give you some examples that are sadly true.

- ✓ I understand what you are going through – I was in a lot of pain after I injured by elbow in tennis.
- ✓ You think you have it bad – you should see what so and so down the hall is facing.
- ✓ Suck it up. There are people worse off.
- ✓ Buck up and do it for Jesus!
- ✓ Don't you want to get better
- ✓ It could be worse.
- ✓ You'll have another baby – spoken to a young woman who had just experienced a miscarriage.
- ✓ Think positively. I remember a senior chaplain at the hospital at which I was doing pastoral training responded to a fellow classmate's verbatim when he noted that the

chaplain trainee had encouraged the patient to do just that. The chaplain said “it is a very fine line between looking on the bright side – which is commendable – and being artificially cheerful – which is not. He went on to say quite bluntly, “when you have got five tubes running out of you and have to call a nurse to turn you on your side, it is a wee bit difficult to think of sunshine and cute puppies!”

✓ One day you’ll look back and see this as a gift!

Finally my all-time favorite of things not to say to people in Job like situations – the man was in a Stryker frame, the recent survivor of a very bad car accident in which a family member had died.

Chaplain trainee strode into his room all bright and far too unaware, inexperienced or insensitive to the situation he faced with the man in the Stryker frame –

✓ How’s your walk with Jesus going?

If the man in the bed could have moved quickly and without considerable pain,

He would have decked that chaplain.

As it was, with all the strength he could muster, he said GET OUT.

Well, actually he said more...but suffice to say, the chaplain trainee read this situation – poorly!!

The three friends could have been so helpful to Job.

Just by their presence, they could have been what the late Henri Nouwen termed “someone’s tomorrow” – a reason for going on – just knowing someone was concerned for them.

But the three friends chose to think only of themselves and their opinions,  
To speak in a way that belittled,  
Patronized,  
Essentially ignored Job’s condition and his worth as a human being, as a child of God

May none of us be found wanting in offering support, comfort and consolation when the Job like situations – which always come with human faces attached-- enter or cross our lives.  
AMEN