



REPLICATED GRACE: Grace in the Darkness

Job 23:1-17

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The Spirit of God, the endurance given by God, the restorative life made possible by God, often is made manifest in the very places of pain and brokenness we least expect to encounter such love. In this season of Lent, we are learning about some of the different ways God appears and shares grace in the lives of those who are least expecting such new life to be received. Our scripture today leads us to what is perhaps one of the more well known Old Testament stories about someone dealing with suffering. Today's text is found in the middle of the book of Job; a book that offers us nothing more or less in the historical narrative of our faith than to tell us about this one man, Job, and the events of his life.

The book of Job, and the story of Job's life, is one we in the church prefer to avoid. The story is not an easy story to recall, and it certainly doesn't represent the kind of life we anticipate living as persons devoted and dedicated to faithfulness in God. And be assured of this, the story of Job, if nothing else, is just that – it is a story of someone who was devoted and dedicated to faithfulness in God.

From the very beginning of the book of Job, in the first verse of the first chapter, we are told, "There was man whose name was Job, and he was blameless and upright, one who feared God and who turned away from evil." It goes on to tell us that Job offered burnt-sacrifices as offerings, as was required in the Jewish law. He was near perfect in his observance of the law and never thought about turning from God. Job was so well positioned in his faithfulness that even the Lord said of him, "There is no one like him on earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and who turns from evil."ⁱ

Not only was he rich in faithfulness, he was also a wealthy man. Job had seven sons and three daughters, seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and many servants. He is thought to have been the wealthiest man in all his region.

While Job's faithfulness was ideal, and his wealth great, his life became anything but perfect. Satan – who you've perhaps heard me define before as the heavenly building inspector – offered to God that he would put Job to the test to assess the strength of Job's faith. Evil is embodied in many forms throughout the biblical text (as serpents, as Satan, as physical enemies, as human empire, as a Legion of demons, etc.), but in each case, the role of evil is the same. Evil comes to inflict and carry out ideas, thoughts, actions, and historical narratives that go against the eternal will of God. The story of Job is no different. While often debated, it should be stated up front: Satan comes to carry out actions against Job that are very much against the nature of God. What Satan will do is not in line with what God wants to happen.

What will happen to Job is, as the text indicates, the desire and will of the evil one who hoped to turn Job against God.

And so it came to pass: it started out an ordinary day in the life of Job. He was at the homestead, going about his day as if nothing were out of place. His children were drinking wine at the home of the eldest son. Life for Job and his family was grand. But then everything changed. Without notice, without expectation, life took a complete 180.

Four servants, one right after the other, came running up to Job. The first says, “all of donkeys and oxen have been taken, and your servants in the field killed.” The second comes and offers, “fire fell from the heavens and killed the whole flock of sheep, and it took the lives of the servants watching them.” The third says, “the full caravan of camels has been taken, and the servants there killed.”

This is turning out to be a bad day. Job has lost the entirety of his livestock. His livelihood has been wiped out.

And then the fourth servant came running up. “Master Job,” I can hear him saying, “your kids – your sons and daughters – were at your first born son’s house. A great wind came up across the desert and collapsed the house. Your children ...” The servant would have paused, not wanting to continue his own sentence. Job would have ordered him to continue. “Your children have all perished. I am the only one who made it out.”

Job has just experienced the worst of the terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days.

Job was crushed – wouldn’t you have been? Losing one’s wealth and livelihood is detrimental. But the pain of losing one’s job and wealth is nothing compared to losing one’s children. I once knew someone who had lost her daughter. I can still hear her asking me, “Why should anyone ever have to bury their child?”

Job was devastated. Before Job had even processed the first loss, he had lost everything.

Yet Job, even as he tore his clothes and shaved his head in mourning and grief, he found the strength to fall to the ground to worship God. His steadfast faith remained true.

Some time after this, Job again suffered a great hardship. His health was taken from him. He was inflicted with sores from his feet to the crown of his head.

Job had lost his wealth, his children, and now his physical health. Job’s life was in such shambles that his wife said to him, “Do you still insist on your integrity?” Things were so bad that even his own wife, the only family member still living, started to question if he wasn’t indeed an unfaithful man. She questioned, how could so many negative things happen to someone who claimed such righteousness and faithfulness?

All of this – the loss of his children, livestock, wealth, and his health, and the criticism of his wife (the loss of faith in him by his wife) – this all takes place in the first two chapters of the book of Job. It's a quick change for Job. And he, like anyone having lived through such miserable pain, would have been exasperated by the devastation of life. It's that moment of living when every corner you take you are uttering the words, *what will go wrong next? And, how could this possibly get worse?*

But it got worse.

After having dealt with such immense loss, Job had nothing but the support of what remaining friends he had left in the world. We're told he had three friends: Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. They came to Job to console and comfort him. They saw him in his anguish – his clothes were torn and he was lying in ashes of grief. Like true friends, they did not question him; instead, they too tore their clothes and joined him in the ashes. For seven days and seven nights the four of them sat there in the ashes and no one spoke a word. After those seven days, Job lamented of his grief.

What followed was a series of accusations and targeted indictments by his friends. In the midst of their ash-fest of grief, Job already broken and tormented with anguish, Job's friends systematically accuse him of having done something against God for which such hardships were punishments. The friends said, "Since you are suffering, you must have done something to deserve this."

What Job's friends offer is the false-promises of modern-day prosperity gospel teachers. There is this false notion that is offered that says, if things are going well for you, it's because you are being obedient and faithful to God. The converse is also taught: if things are *not* going well for you, it's because you are *not* being obedient and faithful to God.

Job knows this teaching to be false, for he knows he has been obedient and faithful to God. He rebels against his friends, turning from them into a solitary pain, which no other seems to understand or share. Turning inward, disconnecting with those who had offered him nothing but claims of his unfaithfulness, we find Job in a place of utter darkness, in which he is confused and insecure. It is here, in this darkness, we find Job offering the words that were read in our scripture today. Finally, now that we know the pain in which Job finds himself, the isolation in which he has secluded himself, in the confusion and uncertainty of his mind, we can now **start** on today's sermon, 'Grace in the Darkness.'

Job wanted the same thing anyone living in such darkness wants. He wanted to find God. Job didn't struggle to find God when things were going well. Admittedly, who does? Many of us don't even look for God when things are going well; but you better believe God is where we turn first when things get rough. More importantly, when things are going well, we don't have to look for God. When things are going well, we see God in the midst of everything. When life is thriving, it's easy to see God. But what happens when that changes?

C.S. Lewis shares in his book, *A Grief Observed*, that in times of happiness he found God everywhere. In the book he shares about how easy it was to find God until things weren't so easy anymore. He talks about his own darkness - a time of grief and anguish that came after his wife died. In that time of pain, Lewis says of finding God, "searching for God is like knocking on the door of a house and hearing the door being bolted in your face."ⁱⁱ It's not just that you can't find God, it's that it seems God is purposefully hiding from you.

Job just wanted to see God. In our text, Job says, "If I might find him, if I might come to his dwelling, I would lay my case before him, and he would answer me." Job seems to think of God as the great judge. Job just wants an opportunity to talk with God and argue his case. If God indeed is holding something against Job, if the pain and hardship Job has endured is somehow linked to God's punishment against him, Job knows he can reason with God to make it stop – because he, Job, is blameless. As an upright person, Job believes that by finding God, he can reason with God, and God will acquit him of any misunderstanding.

But through the whole ordeal, through the accusations and rebuttals against his friends, "Job, who appears to be pretty much in hell here, is having no luck producing God ... In the darkness, Job is left alone."ⁱⁱⁱ That aloneness, that darkness, is not unique for Job. We all have moments of darkness, where we just want God to show up.

Back in 1997, the final song on U2's album, *Pop*, is titled, 'Wake Up Dead Man.' Lead singer, Bono, echoes the voice of Job, crying out in distress of the darkness, and asking, 'Where are you Lord?' Hear his words:

"Jesus, Jesus help me,
I'm alone in this world.
And a messed-up world it is too.

Tell me, tell me the story
The one about eternity
And the way it's all gonna be.

Jesus, I'm waiting here, boss.
I know you're looking out for us.
But maybe your hands aren't free.

Wake up, wake up dead man.
Wake up, wake up dead man.

Jesus, were you just around the corner?
Did you think to try and warn her?
Were you working on something new?
If there's an order in all of this disorder
Is it like a tape recorder?

Can we rewind it just once more?

Wake up, wake up dead man.
Wake up, wake up dead man.”^{iv}

Job is lodging his complaint. He’s tired, hurting, and he’s real close to cursing because in such pain, God seems to be absent. Sometimes, offering our complaint even when there is no immediate response, is sufficient. “We may observe that the awareness of simply being heard, of having one’s case lodged in the understanding and sympathy of another, is already an experience of deliverance; while the lack of such a hearing forms one large part of the solitariness of suffering.”^v Job still stands on his platform of innocence. He says, “My foot has held fast to God’s steps. I have kept his way and not turned aside. I have not departed from the commandments of his lips; I have treasured in my bosom the words of his mouth.”

And then, almost hidden in his prose language, we find this gem of remorse. It’s as if we can finally connect Job’s darkness with that which is causing the shade. Job says, “I am terrified at the presence of God, I am in dread of him. God will complete what he appoints for me, and many such things are in his mind.”

Do you hear the almost hidden language Job offers? What Job is most terrified by isn’t that he can’t see God, it’s that he can’t see God’s purpose. Job wanted to argue his case before God so that he could better understand the rationale for God’s actions. But in reality, Job was terrified because he knew that no matter the explanation or response by God, he – Job – would never fully understand God’s will. As much as he wanted it, Job feared a face-to-face with God. As much as he wanted to hear God’s explanation and to argue his own faithfulness, Job knew that his existing in darkness was a better place to be than for him to push to see God because of his distrust or lack of belief in God’s eternal will.

I imagine the turmoil of that mentality is the same pain the disciples felt on Saturday after Christ was crucified. Christ had come and promised great and grand things – he was the Son of God – the most faithful, the most high. Yet things didn’t go as the disciples had expected, and the disciples found themselves terrified and locked in hiding after Christ was buried in the tomb.

Isn’t that what this season of Lent is all about. It’s a season where we remember the darkness of the world around us. It’s a season that calls us to acknowledge the depth of the darkness in our lives, in our communities, and in our world. It’s a season that asks us to lay claim on the hope that in the midst of the messed up parts of our lives, in the messed up parts of our country’s policies, in the messed up parts of our church’s history, that God might come and redeem it all that our steadfast faith might not have been offered in vain. It’s a call to remember that the darkness we experience is the darkness that mimics the grave – a place where in we think there is no hope, no life, no light, and no future. It’s the darkness of Saturday when Christ is dead and God seems to be absent. Yet it is out of the grave, out of the darkness, out of the places where no one thinks life is possible, out of our brokenness, out of our failures,

out of our destruction, out of the friendless, wealth-less, family-less places where we have all but given up hope // that God comes and offers redeeming grace. It is out of the darkness of the grave that we find the eternal light of grace that is witnessed as our God overcomes even death. It is out of the silence of Saturday, that we rejoice on Sunday.

We journey together in the depths of darkness, and we join together in the silence of the grave, as we lay in wait together for God to once more reveal the promise of eternal love. We share in this community together as neighbors, not to condemn and call out one another for any perceived lack of faithfulness, but to ensure one another of the promise of God for new life, for a future of hope, and for the eternal covenant, through which God assures us that nothing can separate us from such great love as this. For the glory of God, we rejoice for God's great love, even for grace in the darkness. Amen.

ⁱ Job 1:8. NRSV.

ⁱⁱ J. S. Randolph Harris. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word; Year B, Volume 3*. Eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas Edward Frank. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word; Year B, Volume 3*. Eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

^{iv} U2. "Wake Up Dead Man." *Pop*. Bono. Island: 1997. CD.

^v J. Gerald Janzen. *Job: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. 1997