



The “And” of the Darkness

Job 23:1-9, 16-17

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In seminary, we were required to take a course called, “Practice in Ministry and Mission,” or PM&M for short. The course required a few introductory lectures to introduce working in a ministry setting, and then invited us to work an internship in some form of ministry. Over a two-year period, while working in this internship, we had weekly meetings with a cohort of students, during which we were able to learn from one another’s experiences in these varying internships.

The internships were set up to offer about 10-hours of work a week, and many of them were unpaid. As pretty much anyone who has worked an internship can attest, interns never work just the named hours. And, in the world of non-profits, it’s rare to find a church or non-profit position that doesn’t invite you to work more hours than contracted.

To help our students, many of whom were taking a full-time class load, manage their schedule with internships that were asking for more than 10-hours a week in unpaid positions, our seminar professor invited us to embrace the word “no.” Our professor talked about the importance of being able to maintain a workable schedule, and offered that, as hard as it can be to say “no,” that saying “no” to taking on additional responsibilities is often the best thing for the organization. No one, she emphasized, can lead from a place of exhaustion.

Admittedly, as a type-A, extraverted overachiever, saying “no” has long been a challenge of mine. Like when you think the preacher is preaching specifically to you on a Sunday morning, I knew the professor was speaking directly to me in that seminar.

At times, saying “no” to taking on additional tasks is extremely important, allowing yourself to maintain a workable schedule that encourages rest so you can be fully invested when you do work and have the energy needed in your personal and professional life.

I want to be clear about the importance of saying “no,” even as we are in the midst of a worship series that invites you to say “yes, and ...”

In the art of improv, saying “yes” is accepting the reality of what is, and is vital to the life of the act. This is not an invitation to become overburdened by refusing to say “no” to the invitation to take on additional work in a DMV culture that is already defined as being *busy*. This is instead an invitation to say “yes” to accepting the reality that you are likely already overworking and, because I think most of us are right now (20-months in to a global pandemic), drained, tired, and in many cases, just outright exhausted. Saying “no” to someone’s request to take on more is really just saying “yes” to the reality of your current state of fatigue.

And, well, what about the “and ...”? In a place of exhaustion, where saying “yes” means saying “no,” where does the “and ...” come in?

Over the past month, we’ve looked at how important the “yes, *and* ...” is in the Biblical storyline and our call to faithfulness. It is the “yes, *and* ...” that offers new life when death seems victorious. It is the “yes, *and* ...” that provides a greater path toward faithfulness when our faith becomes too self-centric. It is the “yes, *and* ...” that offers grace when the law seems so restrictive. Where is the *and* in life when we are at our breaking point of exhaustion? Where is the *and* in the darkness?

The Biblical story of Job is a story of the “yes, and ...” of life in the darkness.

Job was a wealthy individual with a large family and an ark full of livestock. He had 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, and 500 donkeys. He also had a lot of servants to help care for the land and the animals. Job is defined as “blameless and upright,” as one who “feared God and turned away from evil.”

And then, in the course of four back-to-back announcements, Job finds out that everything he had built up for himself has been taken away. In one day’s time, all of his livestock, servants, and children are either taken away or killed. Job is rightfully devastated, yet, in his faithfulness, he falls on the ground before God and says, “blessed be the name of the Lord.”

Then Job himself gets sick, receiving sores from head to foot. Job’s wife begins to question his faithfulness, asking “Do you still persist in your integrity?”

Job then has three friends come to visit – Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. The three are so distraught when they see Job in this condition that they tear their clothes and sit in silence with Job on the ground for seven days, acknowledging Job’s suffering. In his anguish, Job laments that he was ever born. In a prayer of burden, Job offers, “Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire? ... I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; I have no rests; but trouble comes.”

Then from chapters 4 through 23, what we find is something of a comedy act in motion. The interactions between Job and his friends are built upon what is called a mechanistic worldview. A mechanistic worldview says that every behavior or experience is similar to that of a machine, it is caused by an external force. A machine cannot make itself work, it requires someone else to operate or, in the case of robotics, someone to program it to work. As that applies to theology – to our understanding of how God works – a mechanistic worldview supposes everything we experience is due to God’s *direct* action. Whether it is a positive or negative experience, this mechanistic view suggests every experience is due to God’s intentional and direct action.

Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar adopt this mechanistic mentality when taking turns criticizing Job and telling him that the reason his life is so terrible is because of his own wickedness. One of the friends says to Job, “Wicked people deserve this devastation due to their own sin.” Job responds, “I agree, sinful people deserve this devastation, but I am not sinful. I don’t deserve this.” ... Then the next friend

jumps in saying, “You should repent, for this devastation is only due to your own sinfulness.” Job again responds, “I am not sinful; I have been faithful. I just have no one to plead my case before God.” ... The third friend chimes in with, “You deserve this punishment, because you clearly are guilty of sin.” Job replies again, “I know it seems I deserve this, but I have done nothing wrong. I just need God to hear me plead my case.” ... Then the first friend chimes in again! And the second friend, again! And the third friend, again! Each time, they let Job know that his suffering is due to his own action. And each time, Job pleads his innocence.

You know, at some point, you might just want to find some new friends.

When we arrive at our text in chapter 23 today, Job is not only devastated by the loss of family, livestock, and servants ... he’s not only broken by his own sickness ... now his only three “friends” know no better than to tell him his devastation is due to his own lack of faithfulness. Job realizes he has no one left to advocate for him, and so here in chapter 23, all he wants is a chance to face God to plead his own case. He just wants a visit with the divine to ensure God knows of his innocence. Only, in this darkness, in his brokenness, Job can’t find God. Job laments, “O that I knew where to find him, I might even come to his dwelling!”

In this misery and pain, Job laments God’s absence, saying, “If I go forward, [God] is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive [God]; on the left [God] hides, and I cannot behold [God]; I turn to the right, but I cannot see [God].” God is M.I.A., and Job is at his breaking point.

Have you ever been in that place? Have you ever experienced that kind of loneliness and isolation? Perhaps some of us are there now, 20 months in to a global pandemic, in one of the most politically divisive times of our nation’s history, where family and friends are divided among issues that seem so obvious to us each, wondering when our society might find healing ... when we as an individual might find some rest.

The darkness is an exhausting place to be; exhaustion is a dark place to be.

At first, when we consider this kind of experience, we try to find platitudes to comfort ourselves, or to comfort our friends in such isolating moments. We might, to try and pick up someone’s spirit, remind them that God is always there – even when it seems God is absent. I mean, let us not forget Psalm 139, which reads:

“Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me,

and the light around me become night',
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you."

This text offers the opposite of what Job declares. Job says he can't find God, and yet, the Psalmist says God is always there. We might have this urge to try and pep ourselves up, saying yes, it is dark, and ... God is present in the darkness. I mean, the Psalm assures us, God is always there, right?

Perhaps there are times when offering this type of hope is necessary and helpful. But, remember, Job is a man of faith. Job knows God should be there, which is why he has searched so hard to find God. And yet, for Job, God is still missing. Sometimes the darkness is too great, and the platitudes of remembrance just get swallowed up in the deep. Sometimes, such invitations make the darkness that much darker. If God is really here, why can't God be found?

The opposite is also true. Sometimes we praise God for rescuing us from our darkness. Sometimes, we find healing where we thought healing was not possible, and so we praise God, giving thanks that the divine healer stepped in and gave us new life. And then we tell others who are in darkness about our divine healing. Only, our neighbor or friend sees their loved one slip away, dying from the same disease or a similar pain. What are we to discern, that God helped one and ignored the other? Was one's faithfulness not quite good enough? Were Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar right – was the one unfaithful, and the other with faith?

The more I read Job, the more I detest the mechanistic worldview through which Job's friends understand the work of God in the world. In their certainty of how God works in the world, they could only fathom one possibility: that Job was a rebellious sinner in need of redemption. They were convinced that Job's suffering was God's punishment for Job's lack of faithfulness.

In his reflection on this text, Rev. Scott Hoezee offers, "The Book of Job through its first 20+ chapters bears witness to the fact that the only thing that can make divine absence and silence worse are attempts to make quick sense of it or to proffer a simple solution to it."ⁱ

This is part of the beauty and the mystery of faith: we may never fully understand why creation can be so devastating or why death and disaster at times seem so prevalent. We may never fully comprehend why we experience seasons of darkness, pandemic, or exhaustion. But, we do get to decide how to respond and live in the midst of that darkness. We do get to choose how we understand God's work in the world. We can choose to see God as a devastating mechanic, who is actively creating brokenness and pain. But honestly, I don't think the scope of scripture paints that picture. When I look at the broader story of God's involvement in the world, I see a God who is always trying to create new life, to reconcile and redeem the broken, and to resurrect the dead. I see a God who desires health, and peace, and life for all of God's created.

We cannot read any story in the Bible in isolation from the full text. The arc of the Biblical witness is always toward justice, peace, and new life.

So perhaps we need to find another “and” for the story.

Again, Rev. Hoezee offers, “When you are faced with a suffering [sibling], the best thing you may be able to do is acknowledge the pain, admit that you don’t have an answer either, and then sit quietly on the ash heap to wait with your suffering friend for God to put in an appearance. That is sometimes the kindest and most compassionate thing anyone can offer.”ⁱⁱ

We can say “yes,” and acknowledge the pain. We can give testimony to the exhaustion. But, where toxic charity might invite us to say yes, “and ... God is still there. God is present. You just need to look harder. Don’t worry, this is all God’s plan ...”, perhaps it might be better to offer, “yes, and ... I’ll be here with you until God is present again. I’ll support you in this time of weariness. I see your pain, and I will be with you even while you’re searching for God.”

Here at Washington Street, we often talk about the importance of community. We stress that our work as a people of faith is not solely about our own well-being. Our call as the body of Christ, as a community of faith, as members of something greater than ourselves, is to be representative of God’s love in the world. We are making a place for everyone to know God’s love.

Sometimes, to be that representative – to be a faithful disciple of Christ – is to be the “and” for someone else’s story. We were not created to live this life alone. We were built in the image of the Triune God, designed from the beginning to be in community with each another. Sometimes, the most faithful step we can offer is to just be present for one another in their darkness. To walk alongside another, to help them endure the weariness. See, the story of God, the promise of God in Jesus Christ, is that there’s always an “and” coming. And as God’s people, as God’s created, as those who are covenanted with God to be part of God’s work in this world, perhaps we can stop telling people to look harder for the next “and,” and instead, be the “and” they need.

May God lead us and guide us, that we might keep the story going, and proclaim that even in the darkest of nights, we can journey together in search of the light. No platitudes, not cheap answers, no wishful thinking, just hand in hand, walking together, declaring the love of God in our midst. This is the invitation for God’s people of faith. Amen.

ⁱ Scott Hoezee. *Job 23:1-9, 16-17 Commentary*. <http://cepreaching.org>. Retrieved October 5, 2021.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.