

“Approach with Boldness?” Sermon by Emily Rose Proctor
October 11, 2015 – 20th Sunday after Pentecost
First Presbyterian Church in Marianna, FL

Job 23:1-10, 13-17 (mostly NIV)

Then Job replied: “Even today my complaint is bitter;
his hand is heavy in spite of my groaning.

³If only I knew where to find him;
if only I could go to his dwelling!

⁴I would state my case before him
and fill my mouth with arguments.

⁵I would find out what he would answer me,
and consider what he would say to me.

⁶Would he vigorously oppose me?
No, he would not press charges against me.

⁷There the upright can establish their innocence before him,
and there I would be delivered forever from my judge.

⁸“But if I go to the east, he is not there;
if I go to the west, I do not find him.

⁹When he is at work in the north, I do not see him;
when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him.

¹⁰But he knows the way that I take;
when he has tested me, I will emerge as gold.

¹³“But he stands alone, and who can oppose him?
He does whatever he pleases.

¹⁴He carries out his decree against me,
and many such plans he still has in store.

¹⁵That is why I am terrified before him;

I think of all this, and recoil from him.

¹⁶God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me.

¹⁷Yet I am not silenced by the darkness,

by the thick darkness that covers my face. **Heb 4:12-16 (NRSV)**

¹²Indeed, the word of God is living and active,
sharper than any two-edged sword,
piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow;
it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

¹³And before him no creature is hidden,
but all are naked and laid bare
to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

¹⁴Since, then, we have a great high priest
who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God,
let us hold fast to our confession.

¹⁵For we do not have a high priest who is unable
to sympathize with our weaknesses,
but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are,
yet without sin.

¹⁶Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness,
so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

“Let us approach the throne of grace with boldness,” says the author of Hebrews, and there is perhaps no one more bold in their approach to God than Job.

In the letter of James, Job is mysteriously praised for his patience, but persistence would be more accurate, and boldness even more so.

If it's been a while since you've read the book of Job, some context might be helpful. Job begins with a prosaic prologue that reads somewhat like a nightmarish fairy tale.

God asks his chief prosecutor, Satan, if he has noticed his servant Job, a pillar of righteousness. Satan scoffs and says, "It's easy to be faithful if you've only ever had good things happen to you."

So God gives Satan permission to wreak havoc on Job's privileged life, and Job proceeds to lose all his livestock, his servants (save one), his ten children, and finally his health.

After this last blow, Job suffers in silent shock for about a week, while his friends sit Shiva with him as he mourns his wealth, his children, his health, and his image of God as the good Shepherd who would protect him and all the righteous from harm.

When Job finally opens his mouth, it does not sound like the same Job. This new Job is uncensored. The text moves from prose to poetry: raw, honest, anguished, angry. Job curses the day of his birth and wishes for his death.

His "friends" respond by trying first to assure him that God is just, and then to convince him that he must have done something to deserve this calamity. In their theological worldview (still intact), God punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous. And since nothing happens apart from God's will, Job's suffering must be a punishment that could be ended, or at least softened, with repentance.

If you believe the prologue, however, you know that this is not true. God actually brags about Job's uprightness before the calamities come. And Job is having none of this "blame the victim" stuff either.

In our text, chapter 23, Job is in his third round of arguments with his “friends,” who have now become his prosecutors and God’s defense attorneys. And he is not backing down.

In fact, Job is after God. In the absence of a good shepherd, Job demands a fair judge, and he is convinced that if he could just get a hearing, God would exonerate him. Job does not question God’s justice so much as God’s presence.

In a poignant reversal of Psalm 139 (our call to worship), Job looks everywhere for God but cannot find him. And it is God’s absence that makes the suffering so unbearable. Job knows his suffering is more than he could possibly deserve, but because of that he needs some kind of explanation from God. Otherwise God is in danger of being a kind of terrorist.

There is a contemporary singer songwriter named Jason Isbell who wrote a song I recently heard for the first time called “24 Frames,” that made me think of Job. The refrain goes, “You thought God was like an architect. Now you know He’s something like a pipe bomb ready to blow. Everything you built is all for show, goes up in flames...” It’s a shocking image from the perspective of someone in shock, who feels like they’ve just lost everything. Not unlike Job.

In many ways, my life is a far cry from Job’s. Not only do I have my health and that of my immediate family, we just bought a new home and made it through the first trimester of a pregnancy. Our prayers recently have been more “Thanks” and “Wow” than “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

And yet, Job’s questions have been on my heart and mind. Because, you see, this is not our first pregnancy; it’s just the first one to make it out of the first trimester. After our second miscarriage, we began to see a specialist in Jacksonville, and I joined an ecumenical Facebook group of

other clergy women also struggling with fertility. It's not a group you leave just because you get pregnant.

In fact, the women in our group know more than most, just how quickly joy can turn to sorrow, hope to disappointment and heartbreak.

The same week that we made it through our historic danger zone, and got to see our baby alive and moving for a second time, one of my colleagues found out that her third attempt at getting pregnant with help had failed, which was all she and her husband, who had both just turned 40, could afford. You can imagine her grief at saying goodbye to the future she had imagined for their family.

Another two women miscarried, one at 10 weeks and for the third time.

I am as sure as Job was, that the difference in our situations has NOTHING to do with our righteousness or the purity of our desires.

Every day, even as I thank God for the blessing still growing inside of me, I am trying to comfort my friends in the ash heap, who question God's justice, God's goodness, and God's presence with all the grief, anger, bewilderment, and faithful boldness of Job.

I have learned that I cannot answer their questions, nor do I try. Job's friends try for 30-something chapters to explain God to Job, but in the end it is only God's own living presence perceived and experienced that can make things right.

In the meantime, maybe the best we can do for those who are in a time of deep darkness, who feel God's absence or question God's goodness is to encourage them, like Job, to not be silenced by the darkness.

I was having lunch the other day with some friends, and I asked their seven-year-old daughter if she thought it was ok to get mad at God. “No,” she said emphatically.

No doubt this is the message that many of us get implicitly through church and the prayers we hear others pray out loud. Public prayers tend to be polite prayers. Every Sunday we practice praise, thanksgiving, confession, and supplication, but how often do we practice lament, even anger?

The word of God as it comes to us from Job today is indeed sharper than any double-edged sword.

We are likely either to be uncomfortable with Job’s lament, or to identify with it. It has the potential to expose the cracks either in our theology or our faith, to lay bare the pretense or superficiality in our praying, the discontent we try to hide or our fear of and lack of trust in the one we claim to worship.

But who in their right mind wouldn’t be a little afraid to take Job as a model of faithfulness? It is risky to get mad at someone who is infinitely more powerful than we are; what if God gets mad back and punishes us even more?

It is scary for a Christian to admit that it’s been a while since we had a real encounter with God or were sure of God’s presence. Does that mean that everything we believed is a lie or that we have done something to make God shut us out?

But is Job’s response not better than pretending that everything is ok when it’s not? Is it not better than settling for a God that we know only at a distance or in the abstract?

One thing is clear from Job's refusal to be silenced. His relationship with the Almighty is really important to him. Too important to settle for silence. Too important to settle for injustice.

Even in his anger, his grief, his questions, he is constantly turning toward God, seeking God out. Job's stubborn refusal to be ok with what has happened to him or to take responsibility for it is its own kind of faithfulness. His unsettling complaints reveal an honesty that just may be essential for authentic relationship.

I once heard Rev. Eugenia Gamble, then pastor at a church in Birmingham, describe her own Job-like experience. She was struck suddenly with a health condition that took her to the brink of death, and into a coma.

Thankfully, she survived and after a time recovered physically. But she found herself struggling to recover spiritually, to the point where she wasn't sure she could continue as a minister. The problem was that as her body began shutting down, she could feel that she was dying, and yet instead of feeling God's comforting presence or seeing a bright light, all she felt was darkness, pain, and terror. God did not seem present at all.

When she recovered, that memory of God's absence in her time of great need would not leave her. After a time of deepening depression, she finally shared its source with her father. Instead of reacting with sympathy, he said to her, "Eugenia, what makes you think that you're better than Jesus."

She blinked in surprise. "What?" she asked.

"When Jesus was dying on the cross, what did he say?" Her father asked. "He said, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'"

Not Psalm 139, one of my favorites, full of assurances of God's presence and intimate knowledge of us. No, Jesus prayed Psalm 22, which begins in Job-like lament and accusation. Jesus prayed the prayer that speaks first of God's absence.

"So what makes you think you deserve better than Jesus?" Her father repeated.

It struck her then, the lengths to which God had gone to put flesh on God's promise to be with us. Even her darkest moment, her feeling of utter abandonment by God, was shared by God incarnate, by Jesus. So even in that, she was not alone. Even the darkness was light.

As the writer of Hebrews claims, we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.

So it is no sin to cry out to God, when injustice seems the order of the day, when the weight of your burden seems too great to bear, when thick darkness covers your face, and you cannot detect God's presence to save your life.

No, we are to approach the throne of grace with boldness as Job did, trusting that God prefers our honesty to our pretense or our apathy. Trusting that God can and will answer us, and refusing to give up until God does. Trusting that the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ is a God who loves the world, and who comes to us not to condemn us but that we might be saved. This God we can trust to hold our real prayers, however raw, however sad or angry, however selfish. Thanks be to God. Amen!