

23 June 2019

The Dance of Truth
Job 2:9-13, and various

Throughout today's message we will be reading from the story of Job, a good man who lost everything: his wealth, his children, and even his health. Despite all this, Job remained faithful to God. We pick up the story in chapter 2, reading verses 9-13:

⁹ Then [Job's] wife said to him, 'Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.' ¹⁰But he said to her, 'You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?' In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

¹¹ Now when Job's three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home—Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They met together to go and console and comfort him. ¹²When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. ¹³They sat with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.

Many of you, I imagine, know at least the bare outline of Job's story. He was the most godly and righteous man in all the land of Uz, but as a test of his faithfulness God allowed Satan to strip him of every worldly comfort. Finally, as you've just heard, his wife left him in disgust, and he was joined by three friends: Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. After sitting with him in silence – which, by the way, is genuine comfort – these three friends stopped comforting Job and started comforting themselves, by looking for explanations. How could a just God could allow Job to suffer so? Now, usually when we talk about this book, we talk about it as a study in the problem of suffering, which it is. But it is more than that. Whether the book is a record of a historical person or a piece of inspired fiction, it is a deep and powerful work, with many layers of meaning. I want to look at a secondary theme from the book today: the question of authority. Where do we go to seek knowledge of God and God's ways?

Now the three friends know the answer to that. You look to the traditions of the elders and the sacred writings. Their speeches to Job are filled with direct quotations from the Book of Proverbs on the fate of the wicked, and they are constantly referring to the wisdom of the ancients. Here's Bildad in chapter 8:

*⁸ 'For inquire now of bygone generations,
and consider what their ancestors have found;
⁹ for we are but of yesterday, and we know nothing,
for our days on earth are but a shadow.
¹⁰ Will they not teach you and tell you
and utter words out of their understanding?' (8:8-10)*

Or again, here's Eliphaz in chapter 15:

*¹⁷ 'I will show you; listen to me;
what I have seen I will declare—*

¹⁸ *what sages have told,
and their ancestors have not hidden. (15:17-18)*

After all, how can one man in one brief lifetime know more about God than the collected wisdom of generations?

So here's the lesson that the friends draw from their scriptures and their collected lore of the ages: God is just, and therefore righteousness will be rewarded and sin will be punished. *Ergo*, Job must have done something pretty awful to deserve such misery. The fact that they can't think of anything awful that Job has done doesn't deter them; they're perfectly capable of inventing sins for Job. Here's Eliphaz in chapter 22:

⁵ *Is not your wickedness great?
There is no end to your iniquities.
⁶ For you have exacted pledges from your family for no reason,
and stripped the naked of their clothing.
⁷ You have given no water to the weary to drink,
and you have withheld bread from the hungry.
⁸ The powerful possess the land,
and the favored live in it.
⁹ You have sent widows away empty-handed,
and the arms of the orphans you have crushed.*

None of this is true, of course, but Job's friends don't have any choice. Their received theology says that Job must have done something wicked, and they would rather invent lies about Job than face the possibility that their tradition is wrong. And when Job points that out, they get huffy with him. How dare he challenge the received and collected wisdom and inspiration of the past?

But Job does protest. He knows the traditions as well as the three stooges do:

12 *Then Job answered:
² 'No doubt you are the people,
and wisdom will die with you.
³ But I have understanding as well as you;
I am not inferior to you.
Who does not know such things as these? (12:1-3)*

But the old paradigm doesn't work for him anymore, and he's not going to shut up and take it. Again in chapter 12 he says:

²⁴ *'Teach me, and I will be silent;
make me understand how I have gone wrong.
²⁵ How forceful are honest words!
But your reproof, what does it reprove? (12:24-25)*

His friends hold their ground, though, refusing to bend on the authority of their tradition. Job realizes he won't get anything from them except memorized Bible verses and recitations of traditional wisdom, so he looks to God. Chapter 13:

13 *'Look, my eye has seen all this,
my ear has heard and understood it.*

² *What you know, I also know;
I am not inferior to you.*
³ *But I would speak to the Almighty,
and I desire to argue my case with God.*
⁴ *As for you, you whitewash with lies;
all of you are worthless physicians.*
⁵ *If you would only keep silent,
that would be your wisdom! (13:1-5)*

And so he does, addressing himself directly to God:

²⁰ *Only grant two things to me,
then I will not hide myself from your face:*
²¹ *withdraw your hand far from me,
and do not let dread of you terrify me.*
²² *Then call, and I will answer;
or let me speak, and you reply to me.*
²³ *How many are my iniquities and my sins?
Make me know my transgression and my sin.*
²⁴ *Why do you hide your face,
and count me as your enemy? (13:20-24)*

By the way – just a side comment here – the next time you are grieving and some would-be comforter tells you, “Now, now, you mustn’t be angry with God,” you have my permission to beat that person about the head and shoulders with the Book of Job. [sigh] Metaphorically.

Here’s what has happened to Job. His received wisdom, the traditions he has known and that used to work for him, have come smash up against the wall of his own experience. Tradition and scripture aren’t working any more. He wants more. He wants to meet God in person, lay his case before his maker. But how? Chapter 23:

⁴ *I would lay my case before him,
and fill my mouth with arguments.*
⁵ *I would learn what he would answer me,
and understand what he would say to me.*
⁶ *Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power?
No; but he would give heed to me.*
⁷ *There an upright person could reason with him,
and I should be acquitted forever by my judge. (23:4-9)*

So let me pause in Job’s story for a moment. Some of you will remember that what I promised to do in my sermons this month is talk about the essential core of Methodism, the things that we must hold onto whatever happens to our institutional structures in the months and years to come. One of the simplest, and yet most profound, parts of the Methodist tradition is what has come to be called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. John Wesley himself never used the exact term, but the concept is derived from his teachings, and it has to do with Job’s question: Where do we go to seek knowledge of God and God’s ways? Look at the diagram on the screen and the front of your bulletin.



The beautifully simple teaching is that all four of these sources of authority – scripture, tradition, reason, and personal experience – come into play when we seek God. No, they aren't equal. We start with scripture. But this book that God has given us does not speak with a single voice, and it's set in times and cultures that are foreign to us, and it's just *hard*. So we need to look at how it has been understood over centuries of interpretation: that's tradition. And when it comes into conflict with, say, modern science, we have to listen to that witness, too. No, the earth isn't flat with a dome over the top, and Leviticus 13's instructions on leprosy should not be where we go for a treatment plan. And finally, sometimes, everything that we thought we knew about God comes smash up against our own experience. And yes, we need to deal with that honestly, too.

That happened to John Wesley. The young Wesley had that scripture and tradition stuff down pat, and he was a pious, self-righteous prig. Even Wesley knew something was missing, until he had his Aldersgate *experience*, a personal awareness of the warming presence of God. The experience of God is when our inherited faith meets life, and that's when faith becomes significant and real.

This is what happened to Job, too. The more Job demanded to experience God personally, the more horrified his friends were, but Job stood his ground, convinced that God would listen. God would hear. God would rescue him. Chapter 19:

²³ *'O that my words were written down!*

O that they were inscribed in a book!

²⁴ *O that with an iron pen and with lead*
they were engraved on a rock forever!

²⁵ *For I know that my Redeemer lives,*
and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;

²⁶ *and after my skin has been thus destroyed,*
then in my flesh I shall see God,

²⁷ *whom I shall see on my side,*

*and my eyes shall behold, and not another.
My heart faints within me!*

Job's faith is justified. In the end, God appears in a storm and speaks to Job face to face, person to person. Now to some people, what God actually says is something of a disappointment. Like Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, God tells Job that he simply can't understand the ways of God. But at the end of it all, God affirms that in demanding an audience with the Lord, Job has "spoken rightly." And God adds that in hiding behind their tradition, the friends have done wrong. To Job, it's enough. Chapter 42:5: *I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.*

There are Christian groups that claim to have one source of authority – the Bible. I come from one of those groups myself. And I can tell you that what that often means in practice is that those Christians spend a lot of time scrabbling around to find Bible verses to support whatever they want to do – and you can usually find one. In the process, though, they have to ignore all those inconvenient Bible verses that say something else. They claim to respect the authority of the Bible, but they end up using it selectively for their own purposes. There are also Christian groups that claim that church tradition is the ultimate authority, but what that often means in practice is that Christians in those traditions pay lip service to the parts of their tradition that they don't agree with, then do whatever they want. The Methodist Quadrilateral – claiming all four methods by which to seek God – is messier, but at least it's honest. Everyone who seeks God seeks in all four of these ways, and when the different sources of authority come into conflict with each other . . . as they did for Job, and as they will for you . . . as I say, when our different authorities bang heads, why that's when it gets interesting.

That's when we meet God. On our side. Face to face.

* * *

A final word: When the Wesleyan small groups met, they had a standard greeting: How is it with your soul? Not "How's your doctrine today? Have been right recently?" Not "How's your morality? Are you keeping all the rules?" No, our question is about our experience with God. Have we experienced the warming presence of God in our life? How is it with your soul today? Have you even thought about it? Do so. Amen.