

10 October 2021

Healing as Those with Hope: Healing from Loss of Self

Job 29:1-20; Romans 9:25-26

Last week we heard Job's lament over the loss of all he loved. Most of the book of Job consists of Job's conversation with three friends. We read from one of Job's speeches now, chapter 29, verses 1-20:

Job again took up his discourse and said:
² *'O that I were as in the months of old,*
as in the days when God watched over me;
³ *when his lamp shone over my head,*
and by his light I walked through darkness;
⁴ *when I was in my prime,*
when the friendship of God was upon my tent;
⁵ *when the Almighty was still with me,*
when my children were around me;
⁶ *when my steps were washed with milk,*
and the rock poured out for me streams of oil!
⁷ *When I went out to the gate of the city,*
when I took my seat in the square,
⁸ *the young men saw me and withdrew,*
and the aged rose up and stood;
⁹ *the nobles refrained from talking,*
and laid their hands on their mouths;
¹⁰ *the voices of princes were hushed,*
and their tongues stuck to the roof of their mouths.
¹¹ *When the ear heard, it commended me,*
and when the eye saw, it approved;
¹² *because I delivered the poor who cried,*
and the orphan who had no helper.
¹³ *The blessing of the wretched came upon me,*
and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy.
¹⁴ *I put on righteousness, and it clothed me;*
my justice was like a robe and a turban.
¹⁵ *I was eyes to the blind,*
and feet to the lame.
¹⁶ *I was a father to the needy,*
and I championed the cause of the stranger.
¹⁷ *I broke the fangs of the unrighteous,*
and made them drop their prey from their teeth.
¹⁸ *Then I thought, "I shall die in my nest,*
and I shall multiply my days like the phoenix;—
¹⁹ *my roots spread out to the waters,*

*with the dew all night on my branches;
20 my glory was fresh with me,
and my bow ever new in my hand.”*

We talked about the background of the book of Job last week. For those just joining us, what matters is that Job, the title character of the biblical book, was a devout and faithful follower of God who lost everything – his wealth, his children, and his health. It is a study of the problem of suffering on earth. Last week we looked at Job’s heart-rending lament over the injustice of his tragedy. After that outcry, most of the book consists of a series of speeches. Job has three friends – Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar – who come to comfort him, and end up arguing with him. As Job declares that God is not just, the friends feel obliged to prove him wrong. They defend God’s justice even to the point of making up sins that Job might have committed to deserve his suffering. I myself have known comforters like that. Anyway, our passage today is from that conversation, as Job wistfully voices one of his griefs.

In this passage, Job remembers how in the old days when everything was going smoothly for him, he would go to the city gate – where the elders met in council – and people would leap up and make room for him. Young men would move to the back of the crowd, old men would stand respectfully until he sat, and nobles would hold their tongues while he spoke. He had a high position in society, was respected by other people, and even poor people spoke reverently of his many gifts of charity. Job dwells fondly on how he had helped the downtrodden, although it must be noted that he dwells most fondly on how much other people admired his works of charity. But all that is gone. When his wealth disappeared, he lost it all: position, respect, admiration. All that’s left to Job is an aching memory of who he used to be.

It happens. Last week we talked about the trauma of grief over the loss of a loved one, but sometimes the person we lose is ourselves, or at least the person we believe we are. We all have a persona, an image of who we believe we are and that we present to the world. But then some wound, some adverse event, can take that persona away, and leave us with the emptiness of not knowing who we are any longer. This can happen in a variety of ways, because everyone’s persona is different, but there are some typical patterns to be traced. For instance, we men are socialized to take our identity and sense of self from our professions. It’s how we introduce ourselves, and it’s the first thing we note when describing others. “Oh, he’s a mathematics professor,” “He’s a police officer,” and so on. And within our own professions, we take our sense of value from how high we have risen in that profession – from our positions, our titles, and of course our salaries. Now it should be noted that women can be just as obsessively career-driven as men, but as a generalization, this is how many men find their sense of self: by what they *do* and how well they do it.

So what happens when that job is gone? We’ve probably all known someone – in my experience this is *always* a man – who works and saves for retirement, finally retires, and then promptly declines and dies, as if the job was that person’s only reason to live. Or, even more traumatic, your job can be taken from you. And for those whose entire identity was wrapped up in their career, losing your job feels like losing yourself, and the longer you’ve had that career, the harder that loss is. When you look at suicide statistics, you know what profile tops the list? Middle-aged men who have lost their jobs. But it should be noted that young men in places

where good jobs have dried up – inner cities and former industrial towns – are also high on that list.

Now, as I say, there are women who derive their sense of self from career, too, but those women are less typical. The behavioral psychologist Carol Gilligan describes an important difference between men and women like this: Where men aim to reach the top of a ladder, women try to become the center of a web, connected to a wide network of relationships. For our purposes today, this means that women will often construct their sense of self based on those connections rather than on their career achievements. Consequently, the traumas that shake those women's sense of identity are things like betrayal in relationship, divorce, estrangement from a child or parent, or moving to a new city where they have no friends.

And there are other traumas that take a person's self. Victims of rape and sexual abuse often describe their lives as before-and-after, saying that the person that they were before the assault was stolen from them, leaving them empty. Soldiers and civilians who have survived war, similarly, speak of having lost the person that they were before the horror that they experienced. One of our sources of identity is our family, especially when we are young. What happens to people who are rejected by their families – for instance, for their sexuality? A huge element of their identity is taken from them. Gay teenagers from conservative Christian families are a small group demographically but make up a much larger share in suicide statistics. Or refugees. Just imagine trying to start a new life away from the nation and people and customs that had defined you before you fled.

In other words, we are surrounded by people who have lost their former selves. Every day we pass by some who are living as shells of some former person, because something that once defined them has died or been taken away. Some of those people may be among us now.

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In Paul's letter to the Romans, he cites the prophet Hosea to remind the Christians of Rome that God welcomes the exile. We read chapter 9, verses 25-26.

²⁵ *As indeed he says in Hosea,*

*'Those who were not my people I will call "my people",
and her who was not beloved I will call "beloved". '*

²⁶ *'And in the very place where it was said to them, "You are not my people",
there they shall be called children of the living God.'*

When we turn to the question of how we are supposed to heal from a trauma that strips us of our very sense of self, the first thing we should notice is what our lost persona was based on. Job's lost person, which he misses so much, was that of honored, admired, benefactor of the poor, but what he found out was that that was really about wealth. He loved the way people made way for him and hung on his every word, but as soon as he was no longer the richest man in town, nobody stepped aside for him or cared what he had to say. His old self-image was built entirely on the superficial and fleeting fact that he had been rich and on the even less dependable opinion of others.

And we can say the same thing about many of the other things that we build our personas

out of: professions, careers, wealth again, fame, position, even human relationships. All can feel permanent, but all can disappear without warning. So, obviously the way to heal from a loss of a superficial self is to rebuild a new sense of self, based on something more permanent. And because I'm a preacher in a Christian church, you can expect me to say we need to base our self-identity on our relationship with God. Well, I am, eventually, but before we get there I feel like I need to acknowledge that that's easier to say than to do. The thing is, even when our self-image is based on superficial things, we don't just decide one day to trade it in for a better one. We don't usually think that way. We assume that self-image is who we really are – until it is taken from us.

After college, having felt a calling from God, I entered seminary. It didn't take long there for me to realize that I really loved biblical scholarship and was good at it, so when I finished my Master of Divinity I stayed on for a PhD. And even at that level, I was good. I got excellent grades, presented some papers at conferences, and my dissertation was published by a respected academic publisher in England. When I graduated, I was hired to teach for a year at my seminary, and at the end of that year, I got another one-year contract at a university in Arkansas – but that one was going to become a tenure track position the following year. And all this was wrapped up in my mind with my sense of God's calling. Like Job, it felt as if God was clearing a path for me, making my way straight.

Until God didn't. I didn't get that tenure track position, or any other position anywhere else. I ended up working odd jobs for the next couple of years: babysitter, substitute teacher, and eventually landscaping laborer at minimum wage. Two years earlier I had been an assistant professor on one campus, and now I was on my knees mulching pansies at a different campus. And yes, it was one of the hardest times I've ever lived through. Like many men, my persona was my job (sanctified by my theology of "calling") and I had this picture of myself as a beloved teacher and academic, future author of scholarly books and so on. That self had been taken from me, and it hurt. But that pain forced me to go back and rethink who I was and the whole concept of calling, and over those years I hammered out a different self – which, I'll admit, I'm still trying to live into. I am first of all a follower of Christ, loved for who I am and in spite of who I am. Second, I am called by God, but not to a job or a position or a title. I am called to a task, to help others grow in faith. That identity and that calling will be with me forever. If I get kicked out of the United Methodist church next year, I'll still be loved by Christ and I'll still have the same task. I'll just need to find a new venue to pursue it. But I wouldn't have come to this new and stronger sense of self, if my old self hadn't been stripped away. I was fine being Dr. Morris, professor of Hebrew Bible. It was working for me, I thought. I had to go through the trauma of losing it before I could see how flimsy that persona really was.

So what does that mean for the rest of us? Look at the promise of God that Paul quotes from the prophet Hosea. "Those who were no people, will become God's people. Those who were not beloved, are yet loved. Those who lost their very identities, who were called "No one" will be called "Children of God." So first let me speak to those who have gone through or who are experiencing this trauma of self. If you have lost the job or career that defined you, you are loved by God, and that can never be taken from you. If you have lost your network, your community, you are loved by God, who is always with you. If your family has turned you away, God has not and never will. If your trust has been violated by assault, you are still loved, gently,

by God and that's forever. That may not feel like enough right now. But it actually is. God's love, once accepted and planted, expands to fill every emptiness.

And for those who are comfortable with who you are, I'm glad. Maybe you got it right the first time. But if ever a time comes when you need to rebuild, to start over, start here. This is where there is healing.