

17 October 2021

Healing as Those with Hope: Healing from Loss of Hope

Job 14:1-12, 19:23-26

As we think about trauma and healing this month, we continue in the Book of Job. Today we read chapter 14, verses 1-12:

14 *'A mortal, born of woman, few of days and full of trouble,
2 comes up like a flower and withers,
flees like a shadow and does not last.
3 Do you fix your eyes on such a one?
Do you bring me into judgment with you?
4 Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?
No one can.
5 Since their days are determined,
and the number of their months is known to you,
and you have appointed the bounds that they cannot pass,
6 look away from them, and desist,
that they may enjoy, like laborers, their days.
7 'For there is hope for a tree,
if it is cut down, that it will sprout again,
and that its shoots will not cease.
8 Though its root grows old in the earth,
and its stump dies in the ground,
9 yet at the scent of water it will bud
and put forth branches like a young plant.
10 But mortals die, and are laid low;
humans expire, and where are they?
11 As waters fail from a lake,
and a river wastes away and dries up,
12 so mortals lie down and do not rise again;
until the heavens are no more, they will not awake
or be roused out of their sleep.*

We have talked this month about different sources of trauma, different kinds of loss that can leave lasting wounds. But every wound is different, as every person is different, and some people experience a second stage of trauma that is especially frightening: a loss of hope. Generally, when we have a traumatic experience, we respond as our bodies are programmed to do, with a burst of energy and adrenaline, reacting to the crisis with the so-called “fight or flight” response. Then, after that immediate reaction, we respond in other predictable ways. You’ve probably heard people talk about the so-called “Stages of Grief.” So far in the book of Job, we’ve seen several of these responses, including anger, denial, and depression. But sometimes people get stuck in the process. They stop moving forward, because they can no longer see any way forward. For whatever reason, they begin to believe that things can never get better. This is

where Job seems to be in today's passage. Who can fix my grief? No one. What is there to do? Nothing. Can we appeal to God? Why bother? Is there hope? No. If you cut down a tree, he says, there's a chance it will send out new shoots at the next rain. But human beings? Nothing. This life is unlivable, and death is final and unpleasant.

I should pause briefly here to comment on that last bit. We Christians, of course, teach that there is life after this one. As I said a couple of weeks ago, that that doesn't seem to be as comforting to people facing death as you might think, but Job doesn't even have that. In Old Testament times, those who died were all believed to go to the same place – to a dim, shadowy half-life in Sheol, which was imagined to be under the earth, like the Greek Hades. Everyone went there, regardless of whether they were rich or poor, powerful or oppressed, good or evil. Again, that's not what we teach: Jesus and the New Testament all teach resurrection, but for Job Sheol was what death represented, so when he says that there is no hope for a man if he dies, this is what he believed was waiting for him. There was no hope in this life – nothing would ever get any better – and death was worse.

As horrible as the initial stage of trauma is, for those who move on to this second stage, hopelessness, it is worse. I can illustrate the difference from our own lives over the past couple of years. When the pandemic first hit, and everything closed down, that was scary. It was terrifying to do even basic jobs. Grocery shopping felt like a gauntlet, and then we'd get home and disinfect the groceries before putting them away. Remember that? We were afraid to bring our mail inside. But for all the anxiety, we were also in full creative response mode. People who hated computers learned how to ZOOM (and hated it, but they did it). Here at church, we figured out new ways to do worship. Old patterns were broken. There were even things that were sort of refreshing. *Nobody* complained, "We've never done it that way before," because, guess what, we'd never done any of this before. It was hard, but there were rewards, and we knew it was temporary: "We've just got to hold out until there's a vaccine." And then there was, and a cloud lifted. What had been a faint hope became a reality. Covid numbers dropped sharply. The hope of returning to normal gave us new energy and purpose. Soon the disease would be gone, and we could throw away our hated masks.

You know what happened next. The vaccine was not approved for children, and that alone meant things could not return to normal. Then not everyone got the vaccine. Then the Delta variant arrived. Infection rates climbed back up and have stayed up. For months now. Yes, those of us with the vaccination are safer from hospitalization and death, but life looks no closer to returning to "normal" than ever. Whatever "normal" means now. And, to judge by our behavior, this time is the worst time yet. Anger levels are higher – among those who are angry about mask mandates and those who are angry at those who are angry about mask mandates. Crisis mode was easier. Looking toward the future and seeing only an endless tunnel feels worse.

And our Covid experience is only a mild case of the loss of hope. On good days we can still bring ourselves to imagine a better future. Now, compare that to the life of someone who is caring for a loved one with advanced dementia. I have known some who have navigated that horrible trail, where the only "hope" ahead is the last thing you want, and you guiltily find yourself envying those who are able to actually begin grieving. I've seen it; but I have no idea what it's like to go through it.

Now try to imagine the experience of oppressed minorities, who have seen every hint of hope trampled on again and again. Langston Hughes, in his poem “Harlem,” writes:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Repeated disappointment is another recipe for hopelessness. Every killing, every Grand Jury verdict, every protest march that leads nowhere is a dream deferred, and that loss of hope is what “sags like a heavy load.” To the addict, every relapse, every restart that stumbles feels like another push toward hopelessness. There is sometimes trauma on trauma – the trauma of not being able to imagine healing. There is hope for a tree, Job says, but for us? And where do you go when you lose hope?

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Job’s hopelessness did not stand. From the bottom of the pit, he looked upward. We read chapter 19, verses 23-27:

- 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!

From the pit of despair, Job apparently finds hope. Just five chapters earlier, he had given up. There was no justice, no compassion, no hope in the world. The trees were better off than humans. And suddenly, from the lowest point of all, he declares that he knows he will be vindicated, even if it takes until the last day. Though his skin may be destroyed, yet in his flesh

he knows he shall see God, and God will be on his side. Where did this extraordinary hope come from? It certainly wasn't that he remembered that he would go to heaven because, remember, Job had never heard of heaven. He wasn't recalling something he had heard. In fact, the point of his dialogues with his three friends was basically that everything Job had ever heard was useless. No, this is something new. So, again, where did it come from? How does hope return to the hopeless?

Job isn't the only one to find hope from within hopelessness. The Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl describes that hope in his autobiographical book *Man's Search for Meaning*. In that book, he tells of his years in four different Nazi concentration camps, beginning with his observation that those who lost hope died quickly. Those who lived were those who had something to live for – a goal for the future, a loved one to whom to return, or even just a purpose for the next day – something meaningful to do within that wretched time of fear and starvation. For instance, those who dedicated themselves to serving those around them in the camp lived longer and stronger than those who tried to look out only for themselves. They had hope because they had purpose. There is an order of operations here. We don't discover a purpose by hoping; we discover hope by seeking out meaning. Hope by itself, without a direct object, is a gassy and pointless thing. We cannot just hope; we must hope *for*. Hope is found when we discover meaning, something of substance worth hoping for.

For Job, this is justice. At the bottom of the pit Job discovers there is one thing he cannot give up: his conviction that there has to be justice somewhere, some day. And in a world that he sees as being thoroughly, irrevocably unjust, he concludes that the justice has to come from God. If God is not just, what's the point of God anyway? So he decides to gamble all on hope one more time, to gamble that the yearning for justice that he feels means that justice is real and that one day he will stand before God and plead his case, and that God will be on his side.

There may be some among us who are struggling to hold on to hope – for any number of reasons. A terminal illness, a broken relationship, addiction, the latest Covid numbers or environmental report. Where do we find hope? First of all, you can't. You don't find hope by looking for hope; you stumble on hope by looking for meaning. But just wishing for "things to go back to the way they used to be" before the pandemic isn't enough. Look for deeper meaning than that. Look for a purpose that helps someone other than yourself. In the camps, Frankl noted that those who served others found meaning. Jesus said, "Those who give their lives for my sake will find their lives again." It may not be where you were looking, but there is hope. Your redeemer lives.