

“Everyone has a plan until you get punched in the mouth.”

This is a quote attributed to the famous boxer, Mike Tyson. I doubt he intended this quote to be a theological statement or for it to be a fitting title for a sermon in a Mennonite Church, but it's become that for me because it strikes me as a decent summary of the book of Job in Scripture. What do we do, spiritually speaking, when life metaphorically 'punches us in the mouth'? When the brokenness of life on earth collides with us head-on, how do we respond, how does it impact our faith, and how do we move toward hope, remembering that hope is not simply complacent wishful thinking but something that inspires wise action in pursuit of better?

Because, as we all know, life *does* have a way of punching us in the face from time to time. Whether it's physical or mental health issues, the death of a loved one, sudden job changes, relationship struggles, school struggles, faith crises or something else. We can have the best laid plans but no one's life goes fully according to plan. Sooner or later, we all get punched in the face and are left stunned, hurt, and wondering what we do next and where was God in all of this. Which brings me to the book of Job.

Along with Ecclesiastes, this book has long been one of my favorites and one that I continually come back to and reflect on because in this story we see a couple contrasting ways to respond when we receive that punch to the face. So I want to spend some time here reflecting on what I see in Job and how I think it can help us in those times when life does not go according to our plans. Now, Job is a longer book but I'm going to do my best to give my succinct summary of it before reflecting on it.

So in the story we are first introduced to Job as someone who was **“blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.”** (1:1). He was also wealthy, possessing thousands of animals, lots of servants, 10 children. So Job is a wealthy and pious man.

The next part of the story can strike us as strange. We're given a peek into something of a Divine Council meeting and read, **“One day the divine beings [or angels] came to present themselves before the Lord, and the Adversary also came among them. The Lord said to the Adversary, ‘Where did you come from?’ The Adversary answered the Lord, ‘From wandering throughout the earth.’”** (1:6-7).

The picture we get is of God in heaven and the various angels coming to Them, and among the angels is one called The Adversary. And the story gets even more strange and we read, **“The Lord said to the Adversary, ‘Have you thought about my servant Job; surely there is no one like him on earth, a man who is honest, who is of absolute integrity, who reveres God and avoids evil?’ The Adversary answered the Lord, ‘Does Job revere God for nothing? Haven't you fenced him in—his house and all he has—and blessed the work of his hands so that his possessions extend throughout the earth? But stretch out your hand and strike all he has. He will certainly curse you to your face.’ The Lord said to the Adversary, ‘Look, all he has is within your power; only don't stretch out your hand against him.’”** (1:8-12).

So God grants the Adversary permission and power to test Job's faithfulness. The Adversary is convinced that Job only worships God because God blesses him. If the blessings were taken away, Job would no longer worship, proving he isn't that righteous after all. And as the story continues we see next that Job has one of the worst days imaginable. One after another he gets messengers who come and tell him that in a series of tragedies all the thousands of his livestock are either stolen or killed, all of his servants

are killed (except the ones who escaped to tell him this), and all of his children are killed. So in the matter of a day, Job loses almost everything.

And we read Job's response, **"Job arose, tore his clothes, shaved his head, fell to the ground, and worshipped. He said: 'Naked I came from my mother's womb; naked I will return there. The Lord has given; the Lord has taken; bless the Lord's name.' In all this, Job didn't sin or blame God."** (1:20-22).

So Job is shown to have passed the test. But the Adversary meets with God again and doubles down, believing that if Job's health was taken, *then* he would curse God. So God agrees and the Adversary **"struck Job with severe sores from the sole of his foot to the top of his head. Job took a piece of broken pottery to scratch himself and sat down on a mound of ashes."** (2:7-8). But despite all he has lost and the intense pain he is in, still Job proves the Adversary wrong and doesn't curse God. His worship isn't dependent on blessing.

So the story continues and we're told Job has 3 friends who come to visit him, to comfort and console him. At first, they just weep and mourn with him and they sit with Job for a week in silence (2:13). After this period of silence, the talking begins. We see Job and his 3 friends go back and forth from chapters 3-31, then a 4th friend shows up and talks for another few chapters. And these speeches all read similarly.

Job grieves and mourns, saying things like:

- "Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb?" (3:11)
- "I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil." (3:26).

He is in deep agony and complains to God, he demands God answer. He says:

- "I loathe my very life; therefore I will give free rein to my complaint and speak out in the bitterness of my soul. I say to God: Do not declare me guilty, but tell me what charges you have against me." (10:1-2).

Job wants to know what is going on, why this has happened. Every now and then, Job declares faith and trust in the midst of his grief, saying things like:

- "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him" (13:15)
- "I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes" (19:25-27).

Job's speeches are a mix of lament, complaint, questions, trust. And throughout them, Job maintains that he hasn't done anything to deserve this great suffering, that he will be proved innocent because he has faithfully walked with God. He says to his friends, who believe he is guilty of sin:

- "I will never admit you are in the right; till I die, I will not deny my integrity. I will maintain my innocence and never let go of it; my conscience will not reproach me as long as I live." (27:5-6).

Job is adamant that he is innocent. That nothing he has done would make this suffering just. And the reason he states this again and again is in response to his friends. Job's friends had a very black-and-white and transactional theology that held that if you are righteous, life will be good; if you are evil, life will be full of suffering. So if bad things are happening to you, like they are with Job, it is because you've done something bad. So repent and God will bless you again. The friends say things like:

- “How long will you say such things? Your words are a blustering wind. Does God pervert justice? Does the Almighty pervert what is right? When your children sinned against him, he gave them over to the penalty of their sin. But if you will seek God earnestly and plead with the Almighty, if you are pure and upright, even now he will rouse himself on your behalf and restore you to your prosperous state.” (8:2-6)

First of all, can you imagine saying something like this to a person whose children just died?! But chapter after chapter we see the friends telling Job, ‘You have *obviously* done something horrible if God is making you suffer like this. Repent and you’ll be blessed again!’ and Job replying, ‘I can’t think of anything I’ve done that would cause this suffering! I am innocent! I’m not going to confess to something I didn’t do just to appease God!’ And back and forth they go.

After several back and forths, God, then, shows up in the story again and speaks to Job. God humbles Job, reminds him of his smallness. God makes the point that Job is unable to fully comprehend or maintain or influence the created order or the moral order of the universe. That is God’s domain and responsibility. And when God is finished, Job replies, **“I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted. You asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?’ Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. You said, ‘Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.’ My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore, I relent and find comfort on dust and ashes.”** (42:1-6).

So the Adversary strikes Job with great suffering. Job cannot understand it and does not believe it is deserved. His friends beg to differ because that is the only way they’ve understood the world, the only way they’ve understood God. Bad things happen to people who have done bad. Therefore, Job must’ve done something terrible and needs to repent. Job refuses, adamant that he is innocent. God shows up and doesn’t answer Job’s complaints or questions directly but brings Job to a place of humility and trust.

But that isn’t the end of the story we have. God then speaks to the friends and expresses his anger at them because they **“have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has.”** (42:7). This whole time we have seen Job not hold back his anger toward God at all, while the friends *seem* to be defending God’s honor. But in the end God commends Job, saying the friends were in the wrong. So I know that summary wasn’t that brief but bear with me as I reflect on what I’ve gleaned from this story.

When the punch-in-the-face came, Job did not settle for easy, simplistic answers or spiritual platitudes. If he did have the same worldview as his friends previously (the idea that if bad things happened it was because you sinned and needed to repent), he didn’t any longer. He listened to his experience that told him that this black-and-white thinking didn’t make sense. And while he sat there stunned and hurt, he also continued seeking God, kept asking questions, refused to believe that God ruled the universe in such a way that this suffering was a just punishment for some unknown sin. This was in contrast to the friends who stubbornly refused to accept anything outside their understanding. For them, life was about appeasing God. Do good, so you can receive good. If you do bad, repent so you can receive good again. One responded to the punch-in-the-face with open-mindedness, honesty, curiosity, faith that kept seeking greater understanding and deeper connection with the Great Mystery we call God. A posture that, I believe, enabled them to respond to themselves with compassion and respond to God with curiosity and honesty. The others refused to think differently and I would argue their theology made them *incapable* of offering compassion to someone suffering deeply. Their theology made them think

their responsibility was to confront the sufferer with their sinfulness rather than meet them with compassion.

This story of Job was especially important for me during the period of my deepest depression and the deconstruction and reconstruction of my faith. There were many things that contributed to this period but the straw that broke the camel's back was the brutal death of our 12-year-old nephew and the aftermath of this event. My therapist at the time told me that grief is a lot like alcohol in that it lowers the inhibitions. And in the midst of my grief I was fiercely angry with God and I prayed bluntly, much like Job.

I've spoken before of Richard Rohr's framework of Order, Disorder, Reorder. That in our earlier years we develop an order to our lives, accepting simple answers and what we're told. This is a natural part of human development. But sooner or later we are pushed into a period of disorder when we meet with the complexities of the world and faith. When we realize our previously held simple answers don't quite cut it anymore. This period of disorder can be a punch in the face. And then we have a couple options:

- I think we can double-down on order, like Job's friends did. We can push out the doubts and questions and double-down on our early worldview, striving for the security we once enjoyed. It often requires ignoring questions and experiences, limiting outside influences. But it's an understandable reaction. Everyone appreciates mental, emotional, and spiritual stability and security and so it makes sense to try to oppose anything that may threaten that.
- But our other option, I think, is to take the long, often painful journey into Reorder. This means not accepting the simple and inadequate answers we once held onto, like Job. It means searching for and being open to a deeper, more robust, more nuanced worldview. It means wrestling with mystery and realizing our limitations of understanding.

Similar to something we saw in Ecclesiastes, I think part of what we can glean from God's words to Job in this story is that it is not our place to try to be God and that we don't need to attempt to understand everything or explain everything about God and faith. We can leave room for mystery. We can rest in the belief that God, however we understand God, is present with us in our journey, even when our journey takes us in unexpected directions.

So Job speaks to me in response to the question of how we can live with hope, joy, and peace when met with the brokenness of the world. This story of Job (and I'll add whether you believe this is a historically true story or not), speaks to me because in it I see a pathway toward holding onto hope and even faith when life punches us in the mouth. I receive from this book permission to rest in the Mystery of God and to stay curious. I receive from this book freedom to not accept simplistic answers or have all the answers or even feel the need to try to find all the answers. I am challenged to learn to dwell in the dissonance and embrace the discomfort of not knowing, embrace the complexity of life on earth. I am challenged to walk in humility, to trust that the Great Mystery we call God is beyond any of our theology or doctrine or confessions of faith and that this is good. And perhaps it means we can rest in this Mystery, trusting that it holds us even when we may not realize or understand.

So I pray that we would find greater hope and joy and peace by following the pathway Job shows us, staying curious and honest and continuing to pursue and be open to God, however we understand God, even when it isn't making sense to us, even when we've been punched in the face.