

Job 28:12-28

Unraveled-The Story of Job

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In my final semester of seminary, in addition to finishing my last few classes, I took a unit of CPE-Clinical Pastoral Education. The IL/WI region of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) requires this experience in order to be ordained. CPE is practical education for ministry. It brings theological students and ministers of many faiths into supervised settings, to practice and learn from actually doing ministry, sometimes in crisis-laden situations. Through intense involvement with people in need, and the feedback from peers and supervisors, CPE participants are supposed to develop new awareness of how their own lives show up in ministry and have an opportunity to practice ministry in light of this awareness.

My unit of CPE was spent at a hospital in Illinois. My supervisor's name was Karrie. Throughout the 3 months I spent in CPE, Karrie and I met once a week to talk about my experiences, both at the hospital and at the church I was serving. She was an expert at getting me to think about the "why" behind what I said and what I did. In the time we spent together, we did not always see eye to eye. In fact, I would venture to say, it felt like we rarely agreed. On one occasion, I needed to miss class at the hospital in order to officiate a funeral at the church. When I told her that, she required me to write a paper explaining why I would say yes to a funeral when I had committed, at the beginning of the semester, to being in class at that time.

I was livid. I wrote the paper and took it in at our next weekly meeting. Karrie asked me to read it to her out loud. I was fuming. The more I read, the madder I got, the more passionately I made my case. By the time I was finished I was more than ready to have the argument I knew was coming. Instead, she looked at me and said, "Great, this has helped you clarify your ministerial priorities and it sounds like you have finally found your voice."

Our relationship was a series of those moments. She never forced me to agree with her, but she did insist that I clarify why I disagreed. One subject of debate between us centered on our differing theologies of suffering. Honestly, back then, I really struggled with being in the presence of suffering that I had no control over, which is pretty much all the suffering. And if you know anything about what

a minister's job is, you can imagine how difficult that would make every single day. There is suffering everywhere and mostly, fixing it is not the minister's role and fixing it is rarely possible. Karrie understood that if I continued to struggle like that, I would burn out in no time. She asked me to consider the possibility that suffering is holy.

The first time she brought it up, the idea that there was anything holy about suffering was offensive to me, but I agreed to consider it. I went home and did what I do when I'm uncomfortable with an idea. I researched it endlessly. It was a problem and I wanted to solve it with books and facts and quotes and proof. You see, that's what keeps big emotions in check for me; dissecting the situation and finding the answer and the clear path forward in light of the answer. I would fully understand suffering and present it to her. She would be dazzled and see the flaws in her thinking.

Any exploration of suffering that includes biblical texts will likely eventually lead to the book of Job. Job is a dramatic dialogue between Job and his friends. The story is an example of scripture that is not historically factual, but does include nuggets of truth or wisdom. Job, though righteous, was subjected to extreme suffering. He lost his children, his servants, his animals, his home, and his crops, almost everything. Throughout the book, Job and his friends argue back and forth about the reason for his suffering and how he should respond to it. In addition to Job and his friends' persuasive speeches, the book includes speeches attributed to God.

There are three contradicting main points made in the book. First, that human suffering is not necessarily deserved; that is, though in some cases we may bring our own suffering about, by for instance, neglecting our health or engaging in risky behavior, suffering very often is unrelated to anything we have done or failed to do. Job argues this point strongly to his friends. The second major point in the book is that people who disagree with the first point, who believe that if a person suffers, the suffering must be deserved, those people will eventually falsify either the character of God or the character of the sufferer. If a person believes suffering is deserved, then either the sufferer or God is wrong. In the book of Job, the friends insist Job is a sinner and is being punished. And Job, in the face of his friends' arguments, posits that maybe God is not fair then, since Job clearly is suffering for no reason. The third point, and the one that is perhaps hardest for us

to wrap our minds around, is that there is really no way to understand suffering. According to the author, God's argument is basically, if there are reasons for suffering, they are beyond human comprehension.

The passage we are reading today, from chapter 28, is the subject of some scholarly debate. It is either the continuation of one of Job's speeches or it is a separate piece, a hymn, inserted into the story sometime later. It probably doesn't really matter, but it does remind us that our quest for wisdom is not new. Humans have been curious since way before Google. It is clear from their speeches, both Job and his friends claim to possess wisdom. Here in chapter 28, the author uses a metaphor to question that. Following an extended description of how difficult it is to mine certain ores and gems, there is a comparison drawn between wisdom and hidden things, like gold and gems, hard to attain and therefore precious. This is Job 28:12-28:

"But where shall wisdom be found?

And where is the place of understanding?

¹³ Mortals do not know the way to it,
and it is not found in the land of the living.

¹⁴ The deep says, 'It is not in me,'
and the sea says, 'It is not with me.'

¹⁵ It cannot be gotten for gold,
and silver cannot be weighed out as its price.

¹⁶ It cannot be valued in the gold of Ophir,
in precious onyx or sapphire.

¹⁷ Gold and glass cannot equal it,
nor can it be exchanged for jewels of fine gold.

¹⁸ No mention shall be made of coral or of crystal;
the price of wisdom is above pearls.

¹⁹ The chrysolite of Ethiopia cannot compare with it,
nor can it be valued in pure gold.

²⁰ "Where then does wisdom come from?
And where is the place of understanding?

²¹ It is hidden from the eyes of all living,
and concealed from the birds of the air.

²² Abaddon and Death say,
'We have heard a rumor of it with our ears.'

²³ “God understands the way to it,
and he knows its place.
²⁴ For he looks to the ends of the earth,
and sees everything under the heavens.
²⁵ When he gave to the wind its weight,
and apportioned out the waters by measure;
²⁶ when he made a decree for the rain,
and a way for the thunderbolt;
²⁷ then he saw it and declared it;
he established it, and searched it out.
²⁸ And he said to humankind,
‘Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom;
and to depart from evil is understanding.’”

So, in the midst of a book that tries to understand suffering, there is this passage about the quest for wisdom and understanding that basically says the search is in vain. Instead of spending our lives in search of the answer to why “bad things happen to good people,” we should humbly admit that some things are not able to be solved, they have to be lived. In theory, that may sound reasonable, but in practice, not so much. When we suffer, when tragedy strikes, we want to know why. We want to understand why things happen the way they do and to the people they do, mainly us and the people we love. I wonder, if on some level, we think if we understand suffering, we can avoid it.

Dr. Kate Bowler, professor at Duke Divinity School, wrote a book a few years ago called, *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*. The book was in response to her stage 4 cancer diagnosis. In an interview about the book, Catherine Woodiwiss of Sojourners magazine asked Bowler to expand on “the lies she has loved.” One of the lies she has loved is the lie that she is special. She said in the interview, “...I thought I was special. I thought there was something special about me that would prevent the worst possible thing from happening. I don't know where that came from, if it's just the hubris of living and that we can't imagine ourselves dying at all. But I think I *really thought* I was special...It's hard when you assume that your intellect or your hard work or your anything is going to get you out of the pit you're in, and then it just doesn't. And then you realize that almost everything that makes your life work is contingent on factors that you have almost no control over, and usually no control over at all.”

<https://sojo.net/articles/youre-not-special-and-other-lessons-kate-bowler>

Just as Job's righteousness and piety did not insulate him from terrible suffering, our high IQs, dedication to our jobs, large retirement accounts, organizational skills, carefully planned days, and tireless advocacy for others, will not protect any one of us. We will all suffer and we can't change that. We can be present for each other in our suffering and, in some ways, we can diminish our own suffering and the suffering of others. But suffering is.

In my CPE days of voraciously reading what various theologians had to say about suffering, so that I could respond to Karrie and her the errors of her thinking, I was quite sure there was nothing holy about suffering. God does not cause suffering. We do not need to suffer to be in God's presence or to connect with God. God does not love us more if we suffer. No, suffering cannot be holy. On my last day of CPE, in my last meeting with Karrie, I presented my final paper and concluded it proudly with my *evidence* that it isn't suffering that is holy, but our response to one another in the midst of suffering that is holy. When I finished, Karrie said, "This is good work and I am so glad it has helped you clarify what you believe and it is wonderful to see you are learning to trust your voice."

That was six years ago. My theology of suffering has evolved a little. I still can't say I believe suffering itself is holy, but I have experienced the Holy in moments of intense suffering. In order to do that though, I have had to give myself permission to not know and to not understand. How can God really be present in suffering? I don't know, but I have experienced it. How can we experience both intense suffering and amazing grace? I don't know, but I know it happens.

About a year after I finished CPE and graduated from seminary, I got an early morning phone call from a friend who is a chaplain at the hospital where I completed CPE. She called to tell me Karrie died that morning after a long battle with cancer. I thanked her for calling me and as I hung up, the words, "long battle with cancer" stuck in my mind. I found out later that she had been undergoing treatment while I was her student in CPE. She had been suffering herself when she asked me to consider that suffering was holy. Who was I to tell her it wasn't? My God...the grace she had shown me. She encouraged me to search for myself, to come up with my own answer, knowing that was the way it had to be if I was ever going to be able to sit with others in the midst of suffering.

Everywhere we look, there is suffering. People are dying of a virus that we are still learning about. Neighbors are angry that they have to wear masks and practice social distancing because of something they don't fully understand. Our Black siblings have been suffering since the sin of racism produced the false reality of race as a feature of the natural world. We are suffering because we feel isolated and alone, because our bodies are sick, because the one we loved doesn't love us, because we don't know how we will make ends meet, because we are angry, and because we are afraid of what is coming next. Suffering is everywhere and we don't understand it.

What would it mean for us to embrace the mystery of God, even in the midst of suffering? What would it mean for us to give each other and ourselves the space and the grace to meet God in our own ways, in our time? Maybe we would be surprised to really see that God is there no matter what and it doesn't require us to believe the right things, do all the things, or pray the right kind of prayer. Maybe we will eventually discover that in the worst moments of our lives there is more than enough, not in the ways the real televangelists preach a prosperity gospel that tells us the more we give, the more we get. But that we would realize that in each of our lives, there are days when things just do not work out like we had hoped. And because of that, we need to be a little gentler with one another and with the world. You are not alone. Amen.