

4-13-25 Sermon: “Wisdom from the Ash Heap” – Job 10, 38, 42

God does not answer Job’s question.

Did you notice that? Job demands an answer for his suffering, an answer God never gives.

At first God is silent. Job’s three friends and take it upon themselves to speak *for* God. The answers they give are essentially, “God is punishing your sins,” “Everything happens for a reason”, and “Get over it.” (Job *probably* needs to find some better friends.) But for 36 chapters, God stays silent, until *finally*, in a voice a mighty whirlwind, God speaks.

Rhonda read us the beginning of God’s response to Job. It goes on for 4 chapters – a beautiful testament to God’s tender, loving care for creation. But none of it answers Job’s question, “Why do the innocent suffer?” Here, God is a little like a politician in a debate: “I hear the question, but I don’t like it, so I’m going to talk about something else!”

Even more perplexing than God’s non-answer is the fact that Job accepts it! God speaks to him from the whirlwind, and somehow, Job is satisfied.

The Book of Job is beautiful, provocative, infuriating little riddle. Forty-two chapters of poetry about human suffering that offer no actual answer for why humans suffer.

Job is utterly unsatisfying...but it *is* real, isn’t it? Has there *ever* been a satisfactory reason for innocent suffering? *Could* there ever be?

I have learned things recently – things that many of you already know – about the senselessness of unexplainable suffering. In the last eight months, I’ve lost two pregnancies, and I’m trying to learn how to grieve two lives that ended before they began. And like Job, I have found myself shaking fists at the sky and asking, “Why?”

But unfortunately, unlike Job, I have Google!

Friends, believe you me: there is no *end* to the people on the internet who want to tell you *exactly* why you lost that pregnancy and what you can do to keep it from happening again! What you should eat – and not eat!, what you should do – and not do! Candles, cleansers, and cleaning products, oh my! It may not shock you that these are not my top concerns. What even *is* a “skin-care routine?”

And because we live in Taos, the local epicenter of ‘woo woo,’ many well-meaning acquaintances have told me that I just need more “positive energy.” Did y’all know positive energy could make a baby?! Job’s friends, it seems, are alive and well – on the internet...and in the aisles of Smith’s!

Now, don’t hear me wrong; knowledge is a wonderful thing. And as I gear up for round three, it’s good for the doctors and me to know what we can do differently this time. But when it comes to the suffering itself, I have to take a step back and say, “Ginna...even if you *got* the answer to that question – ‘why?’ – do you really think it would make the grief go away?”

There really isn’t an acceptable answer to the question of innocent suffering, is there? Someone can tell us, “Here’s what caused the accident,” or “This is where the cancer started,” or, “Hey, sorry, Job, I made a bet with the devil!” – but knowledge does not heal our suffering. An explanation cannot repair the place where our life has been torn apart.

Maybe Job asks “why?” because it’s the only thing he knows to do. The only word he can remember on the ash heap.

Friends, when we cry out from our suffering, “Why, God? Why?” I wonder if what we’re really trying to say is, “Help!” If our plea is less a question than a prayer of lamentation: “This is

not right! This isn't how it should be! God, if you really 'so love the world,' come down here and *do something!*"

I'll tell you the one and only thing that has brought any relief to my experience of grief and suffering these last 8 months: Presence. People – or sometimes the dog – willing to show up and bear witness to the grief. People who are not afraid of tears or gallows humor, or the fact that some things just can't be "fixed."

Perhaps you have experienced something similar in your own times of suffering. The casseroles, the cards, the phone calls. The ones who come to the funeral, or drive you to chemo, or just ask, "This is really hard, isn't it?" The people who are willing to brave discomfort to just sit with you in the ashes.

Friends, this, *this* is what God does for Job. God does not answer Job's question of why he is suffering. There is no acceptable answer. But God shows up and refuses to abandon Job to the suffering.

Job thinks that he wants an answer. But what ultimately satisfies his soul is God's presence. God speaks to him on the ash heap. And Job's suffering is soothed.

This week is Holy Week. A week when we walk, with Jesus, toward the cross. A week when we remember that God knows what it feels like to suffer pain, betrayal, loss. That God *chooses* the cross, chooses to come alongside us in our suffering.

Perhaps that is the only acceptable answer to innocent suffering. That God has gone before us. That when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will find Jesus there waiting for us, ready to accompany us through.

This is wisdom: says Job. That to our deepest questions, there are, ultimately no answers. There is just showing up and loving one another through it. Amen.