

First Congregational United Church of Christ
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost- September 24, 2023

Scripture lessons: Job 23:1-9, 16-17

IN THE PIT

There it is- a pit of unjust suffering. You're slammed, hurt, and thrown into it, and you've done nothing to deserve it. If the God that we worship is perfect in love, justice, and power why does this happen? In his pit, our brother Job shouts that question.

He is, the Scriptures say, a man "blameless and upright" (Job 1:8). But suddenly his ten children are all killed. He's afflicted from head to toe with open, running sores. His pain is awful and unrelenting, and his wife tells him, "Job, curse God and die." At first, Job says, "Shall we receive good at God's hand, and not receive the bad?" (2:10)

Three of his friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, come to comfort him. They see that Job's suffering is awful beyond words. They sit with him silently for seven whole days.

Finally, Job speaks. His attitude has changed, and he curses the day that he was born. "Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire? . . . Why is light given to one in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, who long for death, but it does not come . . . ?" (3:11, 20-21)

Job has spoken, so his friends decide to speak. In the face of Job's worm-eaten sores and his ten dead children, what will they say? They've heard Job curse his life, so they set out to defend God.

Each in his own way tells Job, "Look, friend- God is just. God makes sure that we get only what we deserve. If you're suffering like this, you must have done something *terribly* wrong. You must confess your secret sin" (chapters 8, 11, 15, 18, 20, 22).

Job refuses. He insists, "I hold fast my righteousness and will not let it go. My heart does not reproach me for any of my days" (27:5-6).

Margarita and Job have a lot in common. Writer Robert Coles tells us about her in his book, *The Spiritual Life of Children*. Ten years old, Margarita lives on one of the brutally poor hillside favelas in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Tin shacks and garbage heaps are most of what she knows.

Margarita points to the well-known "Christ of the Andes" statue whose arms stretch out over Rio from high above on Mount Corcovado. She says, "When I look at Jesus up there, I wonder what He's thinking. He can see all of us, and He must have an opinion. I try to talk with him . . . He's all that I have . . ."

Margarita waves her hand over the squalor of the favela. "A lot of times I ask Jesus why he does things like this. He must see what we see . . . Mother used to tell us that we'll go to heaven because we're so poor. I used to believe her: . . . (But now I think) she just says that. It's a way of shutting us up when we're hungry.

She continues: "Now when I hear her say it, I look up at Him, and I ask Him: 'What do YOU say, Jesus? Do You believe her? Do You believe the priest who says the same thing? Do You notice the big car that he drives, and do You notice the big house that he has? . . . What do you think of him . . .?'

“I shouldn’t blame Jesus! I do, though, sometimes. He’s right there- that statue keeps reminding me of Him . . . and I’m either upset with Him or I’m praying for Him to tell me why the world is like it is.”

For Margarita, we could be like Job’s friends. We could explain to her that her poverty is the result of a long and twisted history. We could explain the tangled historical, social, economic, and political roots of life in her favela, but she’d likely see through our thicket of words and still ask, “Why?”

“I look up and I ask Him: ‘What do You say, Jesus?’”

In time, Job becomes more like Margarita. At first, he simply despairs and wants to die. But then he turns defiant and tells his friends to shut up. Like Margarita, he wants God to give some answers.

To his friends, he cries out: “You are all miserable comforters! Have your windy words no limit? . . . God has broken me. God has seized me by the neck and dashed me to pieces . . . He slashes open my kidneys and shows no mercy: he pours out my gall on the ground” (16:2-3, 12a, 13).

“Oh, that I knew where I could find him . . . I would lay (out) my case . . . God would give heed to me . . . (A)n upright person could reason with him, and I would be acquitted forever by my judge” (23:1-7).

Well, Job, to all of that the answer is yes and no. Yes, God comes and acquits you as an upright man. But no, you don’t get to make your case. You’re not allowed to reason with the Almighty. And why not?

Apologies first of all, to those of us who expect God to always speak in calm and unruffled tones. God comes and answers Job from out of a *whirlwind*. God has heard Job’s cries and complaints and has listened to his questions and protests. But now it’s time for Job to pipe down. At this point, God will do the talking.

God roars, “Who is this that darkens counsel by words *without knowledge*? Job, I will question you, and you will answer me . . . Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Have you ever commanded the sun to rise. . . Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Have you let the wild ass go free. . . Does the wild ox serve you? Do you give the horse its might? Look at the hippo I have made. It’s the first of my great deeds . . . What about the crocodile, Job? Can you take it with hooks or press down its tongue with a cord? Will it speak soft words to you?”

God raves on. The dawn, the sea, and the earth; snow, hail, rain, and ice; stars in heaven, clouds, and lightning; deer, ostriches, hawks, and eagles. God parades all of these before Job and revels in the glory of their creation. (examples all selected from chapters 38-40).

What’s the point of it? God says nothing at all about us human beings or about Job’s suffering or about any of the anguished questions that Job has raised. In other words, *God has come to put Job in his place*. That’s the point.

In effect, God says, “It’s a huge, wide, and deep creation that I have made, Job. I love *all of it* far beyond just you. So much goes on in it that you know nothing about. So, until you do know, you’d best just trust in me.”

There’s more about Job’s place that God doesn’t tell him. From the start of the story, we readers have known that God has allowed Job to be at the very center of a cosmic struggle.

God had bragged to Satan about Job, but Satan had scoffed. Satan had said, "Sure, Job loves You, God, but only because You make it worth his while. Take away all of his many blessings and he'll curse You to Your face." God had said, "We'll see about that, Satan. Go ahead and put him to the test" (1:8-12).

So, Satan tests Job and Job almost fails. He almost curses God. His awful and undeserved suffering wraps him up so much in himself that God has to remind him about the rest of creation in order to keep him properly in his place.

But the ironic thing is that Job's place is actually at the center of a contest between God and Satan. Job doesn't know it, but God has staked God's own reputation on the quality of Job's response.

Will Job be faithful to God simply because, despite all of its painful challenges, this radical trust remains the best and truest response to the mystery of our life in this world? God says yes. Satan says no. God wins the bet.

Job gets angry, Job calls God to account, and Job complains bitterly about the injustice of his pain. But, in the end, Job stands firm in his faith. After God's whirlwind speech, Job admits that there's so much that he doesn't know. He says, "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me . . ." (42:3)

At the same time, God fully acknowledges Job's innocence (42:7). Job, in fact, did not deserve his suffering. Then again, God's justice was not on trial. God's faith in Job and Job's faith in God- those were on trial, and both were vindicated. Job had said, "Even though he slay me, yet will I trust in him" (13:15, KJV). God had said, "Consider my servant Job. There's no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man . . ." (1:8). God's faith in Job and Job's faith in God- both passed the test.

Still, we have to ask, "Was the test fair?" Did God suffer at all in it? Job suffered, almost beyond belief, but did God? If God didn't suffer, if this test of faith didn't cost God anything real, then the test was *unfair*.

That's why we have to get back to Margarita. We return to her because she's talking with Jesus. With Jesus, something different is going on. With Job, God comes *to keep Job in his place*. But with Jesus, God comes to us *to be with us in our place*.

Margarita looks up at the stone statue and sees a cold image that stares out over a mountain of misery. She says, "My little sister is always crying because she doesn't get enough to eat! I hope that Jesus sees everything that goes on here. I hope that he doesn't just stare into the ocean like that statue."

Be assured, Margarita, Jesus isn't up there. He is not a stone-faced statue high up on a mountaintop that's deaf to your cries. Instead, Jesus is with you. He's right next to you. He's nailed to a cross and racked with pain. He's between two thieves, hanging with them and with you, looking out over a garbage dump. Your question is his question, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?"

Your suffering is Jesus' suffering. He is God with you, God suffering even more than Job, God suffering more than any of us can know because God loves us and the whole of creation with a scope, depth, and intensity that is far beyond our imaginations. God *loves* you, Margarita. Your suffering is God's suffering. Your suffering breaks God's heart.

Writer Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy has written a poem entitled, "The Sorrow of God". It's spoken by a sergeant who's out at the front amid the horrors of World War I. He's standing over a corporal who is a mere boy, but who is now lying in the mud, dead. The sergeant says:

“. . . Look at him lyin' there all of a heap
With the blood soakin' over his head,
Like a beautiful picture spoiled by a fool,
A bundle of nothin'- dead.
And it ain't only him- there's a mother at home,
And he were the pride of her life,
For it's women that pays in a thousand ways
For the madness of this here strife.
And the loving God looks down on it all,
On the blood and the mud and the smell.
O God, if it's true, how I pities you,
For you must be livin' in hell.
You must be livin' in hell all day,
And livin' in hell all night.
I'd rather be dead, with a hole through my head,
I would by a damn long sight,
Than be livin' with you on your heavenly throne,
Lookin' down on yon bloody heap
That were once a boy full of life and joy,
And hearin' his mother weep.
The sorrows of God must be hard to bear
If he really has love in his heart,
And the hardest part in the world to play
Must surely be God's part . . .”

God plays the hardest part, Margarita, because God loves all of us so much. But our Jesus-God isn't full *only* of loving sorrow. He's not only crucified, dead, buried, and descended into hell. He is also *risen*. He has conquered sin and death and has come to us in his Holy Spirit. He will come again. With Jesus Christ, we have risen and we will rise.

This is such a crazy truth, Margarita, that is so hard to see. So hard, in fact, that we don't see it. Like with our brother Job, this is God's honest truth that we have to trust rather than see- and this trust is and will be sorely tested time and time again.

Yet only by this faith do we truly come to life. With it, we come to life in sharing with each other the same suffering love that God shares with us. Loving like Jesus, we aim to make God's love visible to everyone everywhere- on your hillside favela, close by or far away in any place where any of God's loved ones are ground down, and in our daily lives with every single person that we meet.

This is our faith, Margarita. In the pit with Job and on the cross with Jesus, it is awfully hard to bear. But, by God, it is the only way to come to life. Amen.