**When Doubt Clouds the Eyes**

**Text: Job 23:8**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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As you know, especially if you’ve stood on this Chancel with the lights on, it’s hard to see up here, because of the glare. So starting next Sunday, I’m going to wear those black stripes under my eyes, like football players wear. Hey, it works for Tom Brady!

Of course, glare isn’t the only thing that can impair our vision. Sometimes it’s impaired by darkness; especially the darkness of doubt, and depression and despair.

That’s the kind of darkness that surrounded Job. Last week we learned that this good and decent man had lost everything. His property, his servants, his income, and – worst of all – his children: they were all gone. And his life has descended into the darkness of grief and depression. Well of course it has! I mean, who can blame the guy? But that’s exactly what his 3 friends do: they blame him for his own troubles. Like a friend of mine who was struggling with some tough issues years ago, so he went to a therapist to help him work through them. My friend laid out his tale of woe to the therapist – he just poured out his guts to the guy – who then said to him, “Did it occur to you that it might be all your fault?”

That’s essentially what Job’s friends said. “It’s all your fault, Job. You somehow brought all of this suffering upon yourself.” To be fair, first they simply sat with him: acknowledging his pain, comforting him with their presence, keeping watch with him in the silence. So far, so good. We would all do well to follow their example. Sometimes there are no words that can bring comfort. When a friend or a loved one is suffering through any kind of loss, we’re tempted to offer words that we *intend* to be comforting, but sometimes they do more harm than good. When someone has died, we might say, “She’s in a better place now.” Or someone, like Job, has experienced one loss after another, and we might say, “It’s all part of God’s plan.” Or someone tells us a story about something bad that’s happened to them, and instead of simply listening, we counter with a story of our own. We do this with the best of intentions. And, of course, when someone passes on from this life, they *are* in a better place. But in the midst of our grief, it’s not always helpful to hear that. Mostly, we just need to know that someone is there; that someone cares. Listening helps.

So initially, the friends get it right: they simply sit with Job in silence. For 7 days they do this. Then Job breaks the silence by crying out in agony. At that point, their job is to listen. But that’s not what they do. They argue with him, through multiple chapters, in which Job and his friends go back and forth, trying to make sense of what’s happened to this good man. But what the friends essentially say is this: “No, really, Job; it’s all your fault.”

Their names are Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. But before we say more about these friends, I need to give you a bit more background on the Book of Job itself.

Last week I said that Job is part of the wisdom literature of the Bible. The Old Testament contains history, law, prophecy and wisdom. And all of it serves as a vessel for God’s Word. The Book of Job is wisdom literature. And *good* literature, fiction and non-fiction alike, contains *wisdom*. The Lord of the Flies is a work of fiction, but it has profound insights about human nature. Presbyterian author Frederick Buechner writes a lot of fiction, but he writes a lot of biblical wisdom *into* his fiction. Similarly, the wisdom literature in the Bible is good literature. It’s not history, but it is nevertheless wise. Indeed, it is *so* wise that for more than 2,000 years the people of God have heard the Word of God when they have read these books.

The notion that if it’s in the Bible, it must’ve actually happened is a relatively new idea. It’s only about 150 years old. If you’ve got a King James Bible, and you’re reading the Song of Solomon, which is wisdom literature, you’ll notice that in the marginal notes it explains that this poem is an allegory for “the mutual love of Christ and his Church.” In other words, this poem is not something that ever really happened, it’s an allegory. And this is not some new liberal idea, it’s in the King James Version of the Bible, the very translation which, many of us were once taught, is the Word of God itself! The King James Version was published in 1611, and this allegorical understanding of the Song of Solomon goes back to the 4th century. In other words, while this poem is technically a work of fiction, the wisdom of the ages says that it points beyond itself to tell us something about God and Jesus and the Church. Not to mention the fact that it’s a beautiful testimony to the sacred quality of human love.

So, the wisdom literature of the Bible is not history, but it nevertheless reveals the Word of God. The Book of Job is wisdom literature, and Job himself is probably a fictitious character, but we nevertheless come to this book prayerfully, expectantly, listening for God’s Word.

So, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar come to comfort their friend Job. And for about 15 chapters they argue: the friends telling Job that he’s a sinner, that’s why he’s suffering so; and Job protesting that he’s innocent, and getting more and more angry at God. The friends tell Job that he must repent, only then will God relent. And Job makes his case to his friends, and even more to God, that he’s been wronged and maybe it’s *God* who needs to repent!

Job comes close to hitting rock bottom in today’s scripture; chapter 23. So great is his despair that he feels utterly abandoned by God. Job 23 is a lament that is every bit as powerful as Psalm 22. You know at least he first verse of that psalm: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!?” Those are the words that Jesus cried out from the Cross. And the Cross is the ultimate example of the suffering of one who is blameless. Jesus was like us in every way, except that he did not sin. Yet the Romans murdered him, as tyrannical powers are prone to do: in both the 1st and the 21st centuries.

Job feels utterly abandoned by God. He goes so far as to do a parody on Psalm 139. This beautiful psalm is an ode to God’s presence. It says,

“Where can I go from your Spirit, or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there” (Psalm 139:8).

But Job says, “If I go forward, he is *not* there; or backward, I *cannot* perceive him” (Job 23:8). And the parody goes on from there. So great is Job’s darkness, so deep his despair, so clouded his vision, that he’s lost all awareness of God’s presence. He’s even making fun of the scriptures that *assure* us that God is near. Job is one angry dude, and he is shaking his fist at the Lord.

Which is to say that it’s okay to be angry with God. In the midst of suffering and grief and loss, it’s okay to shake your fist and ask God, “Why are you doing this?!” It’s even okay to doubt that God is near, to doubt that God is fair, to doubt that God is real. And never mind Job. If even *Jesus* doubted God – he doubted God’s wisdom in the Garden of Gethsemane and he doubted God’s presence on the Cross – if even *Jesus* doubted God, then maybe we shouldn’t beat-up on ourselves when the pain is so unbearable that we’re ready to abandon our faith all together.

You see, doubt is not the opposite of faith. The opposite of faith is indifference. If I’m angry at God, or if I’m passionately demanding an explanation from God, it means that I care enough about God that I’d like some answers. And that, my friends, is an expression of faith.

Sometimes our pain is so great, sometimes the eyes of our hearts are so clouded by grief, that we cannot see or feel or even imagine the presence of God. But even when we cannot see God, rest assured that God sees us. Even if we cannot begin to understand why bad things happen to good people, rest assured that we are understood, by the One who loves us with an everlasting love. And if you find that impossible to believe right now, it’s okay. Let others understand that for you. Let God understand that for you.

The journey of faith is often difficult. Not always, of course. There are those very special days – like the day of our baptism; like the day when we first confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God – there are those very special days when God seems so real, and so near, and our hearts are filled with the joy of the Lord. But there will be other days, when the burdens are heavy, and God seems very distant, and our hearts are filled with despair. That doesn’t mean you no longer believe; it just means you’re human. Others may tell you that you’re somehow a bad Christian for feeling what you’re feeling or thinking what you’re thinking, but God gently whispers – in a voice so quiet that it may even seem silent – “Hey, I’m here. You are not alone. Nothing can separate you from my love.”

Job’s friends defend God and the conventional wisdom that says that virtue will be rewarded and evil punished. But God doesn’t need to be defended. Nor does God need to be somehow shielded from our anger. The Lord has broad shoulders, and can take whatever we dish out. Job doubts God’s presence, Job doubts God’s goodness and fairness. But Job is still blameless. Doubt and despair are not sins. If you remember nothing else from this sermon, please remember this: doubt and despair are not sins. As Psalm 139 attests, even darkness – like the darkness of doubt and despair – even darkness is not dark to God. In suffering and in doubt, in life and in death, and in life beyond death, we are not alone. Thanks be to God.