

Keeping Faith

communion meditation

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Job 23:1-10
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This morning as we gather in memory and celebration of deceased family and friends, I find myself in conflict with our text. I want to speak strong words of comfort and hope, and yet here we are in the middle of Job! My temptation for the morning is to rush to the more hopeful words Job voices here and there. Surely, his "I know that my Redeemer lives" and his assurance that "in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side" (19:25-27) would be appropriate. But how, then, do we return next week to Job's struggle? How do we content ourselves this week with assurances of hope, only to return next week to faith's heart wrenching questions in the face of deep and tragic loss? How, in our search for reassurance, do we avoid the temptation to trip too quickly across Job's terrain to harvest the passages that make us feel good, trivializing in the process not just Job's struggle, but the struggle that each of us faces not once, not twice, but repeatedly?

Job, probably like most of us, grew up richly nourished in a faith tradition that affirmed a God who is both loving and just. With all of Israel, he had given voice to the God who remembers God's people and who calls that people to live out of the richness of memory of the God who down through their history had been faithful. Now in his time of tragedy and loss, God seemed nowhere to be found; and his "complaint," in the tradition of the laments of the Psalms, is "bitter." "If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him." "Oh," Job cries out, "that I knew where I might find him" (23:3, 8-9).

Despite the bitterness and anguish of his words, Job stretches toward faith. Shaken to his core by the fear that God has indeed abandoned him, he is propelled still by the hope that God will hear and vindicate him. In a paradoxical way, the truth of what his lips have so readily affirmed in the past becomes now for Job a matter of life and death.

Job, Carol Newsome suggests, is like the carpenter who goes into his well furnished workshop and unthinkingly picks up his hammer and goes to work. On the first blow, the hammer breaks, rendering it useless; and what was previously taken for granted now rises to crucial importance "precisely because of its absence" [*New Interpreter's Bible: Job*, 514]. And so it is with Job. Certainly in his life before his time of crisis, he had spoken at length about God, justice and the moral order of God's creation; and, Newsome suggests, he would have known something of the importance of that of which he spoke, but only in a way comparable to the carpenter who, as he walked into the workshop, would have described the wood, the nails, and the hammer" in an impersonal and detached manner. Only now as Job has experienced the brokenness of justice and the absence of the God of justice does he possess the urgent, existential knowledge of justice and of God" [ibid.]. For now, you see, it has become for Job a matter of life and death.

Elie Weisel, himself a survivor of a Nazi concentration camp, traces the experience of Job in numerous of his works. In his play *The Trial*, Wiesel's main character, Berish, a survivor of a pogrom in which practically his entire village was destroyed, calls upon a troupe of Purim actors to stage a trial of God. As a witness for those slaughtered, Berish cries out, "Let their premature, unjust deaths turn into an outcry so forceful that it will make the universe tremble with fear and remorse!" The trial is interrupted with the news that a second pogrom is about to begin. A priest offers to hurriedly baptize Berish that he might escape sure death, but Berish refuses. "My sons and my fathers perished without betraying their faith. I can do no less." He goes on to deny, however, that his death represents reconciliation with God. "I lived as a Jew, and it is as a Jew that I shall die—and it is as a Jew that, with my last breath, I shall shout my protest to God! And because the end is near, I shall shout louder! Because the end is near, I'll tell Him that He's more guilty than ever!" [ibid.]

"Those who search for God with Job's eyes," Samuel Balentine suggests, will not simply resign themselves to the conclusions are merely "born to trouble" (4:7) and that hope for anything more is futile.

They will not believe that faith must be forever construed as silent submission to injustice that terrorizes the innocent and subverts the moral foundations of creation. Like Job, they will take their lives in their hands (13:14), fill their mouths with arguments (23:4), and stubbornly insist that the absent God remains committed to a world that has the capacity to be "very good" [Interpretation, July 1999, p. 292].

The faith of those who look through pain with the eyes of Job are symbolized, Ballentine suggests, in the eighteen-foot bronze statue designed by Ossip Zadkine (1890-1967) for the city of Rotterdam. Having viewed the city obliterated by the German Air Force in 1940 and then rebuilt, Zadkine determined to sculpt a figure that spoke not only to the city's reign of terror but also to the city's courage to "embrace the inhuman pain" and to go on living [S. Terrien, *The Iconography of Job Through the Centuries*, 1996, p. 269]. Zadkine's statue depicts a person hollowed out in the center, suggestive of the open wounds that remind the city of its unforgettable defeat. With legs spread apart and braced for support, the figure turns a dislocated body and a broken face toward the sky. Outstretched arms reach upward with flattened palms, as if straining to deny violence a place in a city that will not accept its defeat.

Zadkine's sculpture, Balentine suggests, exemplifies the faith of those like Job, who although their 'hands are heavy with groaning' (23:2) yet . . . refuse to be silenced by a God who 'is not there' (23:8) but should be, must be . . . *will be* there [p. 293].

And so it is with us. We come this morning to remember and celebrate the blessing of those we have loved. Like Israel's Jacob who forever walked with a limp following his wrestling match with an angel, our lives, too, have forever been altered. The recovery of faith does not come easily. Yet we have looked into the abyss and recognized there a loss that only magnifies the loss we have already experienced—the ominous possibility of the loss of faith itself. And so from the innermost part of our beings, as if it were indeed a matter of life and death, we cry with an anguish and a hope not unlike that of Job, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24).