

Listening in Suffering

September 4, 2011 8:30 and 10:30a.m.
First Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. Donald W. Hackett

Text: Job 2:11-13
Lancaster, PA

The Text: Job 2:11-13 New International Version (NIV)

*When Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. **No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.***

Introduction

There are times when you know you are not supposed to say anything. Like when two people just had a major argument and the air is still very tense. Perhaps it is when you walk into a hospital room and the patient is wired up to every machine possible. There are times to remain silent. There are times when the most helpful and healing thing you can do is to be there and to be silent. This was true for Job's friends.

Background on Job

Allow me to be your tour guide this morning for the book of Job. It is located in the Old Testament, right after the book of Esther and just before the book of Psalms. In the flow of the Bible it comes after a large section of books which describe the people of God as a nation (1 Samuel through Esther). It begins a section focused on the people of God in distress, in prayer, in worship and daily life (Job through Song of Solomon). The book of Job begins the very personal writings of the Old Testament. There is nothing more personal than deep tragedy and heart wrenching pain.

I think it is good to step back and remember that according to the Renovare' Spiritual Formation Bible (pg.717) "the aim of God in history is the creation of an all-inclusive community of loving persons with God himself at the very center of this community as its prime Sustainer and most glorious Inhabitant (Ephesians 2:19-22; 3:10). The Bible traces the formation of this community from the creation in the Garden of Eden all the way to the new heaven and new earth." We can learn together from the Bible, and particularly from the book of Job, *how to have this life with God.*

Many think this book was written during the time of the patriarchs (Abraham, Issac, Jacob) around 2000 BC. We do not know who wrote the book of Job but the setting of the account is in the land of Uz, northeast of Palestine. It is the first of the poetic books in the

Hebrew Bible and believed to be the first book of the Bible to be written. We are looking at a very ancient text today that can point us to the heart of what God wants us to know.

Setting the Context of Job

The story opens in Job, chapter 1:

In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil. He had seven sons and three daughters, and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys, and had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man among all the people of the East.

Job's children like to hold feast so after each feast he would offer a sacrifice to God just in case they sinned against God in the process. God loved Job. The text tells us God even points out to Satan how faithful Job was to God. Satan then attacks Job's character. He tells God that only reason Job is so faithful is because God spoils him. Take away all the blessings in his life and then see how faithful his remains. God allows Satan to take away Job's wealth and kill his children. In response to all this, the text says:

²⁰ At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship ²¹ and said:

*“Naked I came from my mother's womb,
and naked I will depart.*

*The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away;
may the name of the LORD be praised.”*

²² In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.

Later, God and Satan are talking again. God points out how faithful Job is even though his life is in ruins. Satan retorts that if Job's physical being is afflicted, he will not remain faithful. So once again Satan is given permission to attack but not kill Job. Sitting now covered with open sores, Job is scraping himself with a piece of broken pottery. His wife comes by and says, *“Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God and die!”* Job replied, *“You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?”* The text notes: *In all this, Job did not sin in what he said.* This is where our three friends come on to the scene, see Job's great pain and sit with him in silence.

Lessons from Job

I am humbled by this story. I do not know if my response to those same events would be like Job's. What happened in his life was tragic and terrible. I cannot image the pain of people who have had life shattering events. I stand in quiet respect.

There are many people who are hurting in our community as we speak. Charlotte, who is her 90's, is recovering from painful neck surgery. She is finding it hard to move her

hands. Another woman has been trying for months to discover why her body has been suffering and increasingly tired and weak. Our weekly prayer cards speak of the suffering that surrounds us each day...loss of jobs, no money, illnesses and accidents. As we reflect on these things there are some truths about suffering for us to remember as we suffering and come alongside those who suffer.

1. Being loving and faithful to God and others does not prevent suffering from entering your life. We forget this. We know if we love and follow Jesus we will experience life at a whole new level. We will experience God's love and forgiveness. We will have the presence of God, the Holy Spirit, in our lives to guide and help us. We will become more in sync with God and his loving purposes in our lives. We forget, sometimes, that we will suffer. Suffering is a part of life.

2. God can shape us through the deep mystery of suffering. What we can discover in the middle of our pain is that God is with us even when we cannot see or feel the Almighty. When all else is stripped away, God is still there. I have visited people in the hospital and they know people are praying for them. They know God is there. They can taste Him. Our desire to be happy, content, fully satisfied can only be found in a life fully resting and trusting God. Suffering can open a door to knowing God in a whole new and deep way.

The Practice of Listening

Why are silence and listening helpful? When you and I join another person in their suffering, our silence honors that person. Words can easily distract and even diminish the moment. Allow your silence to honor that person and struggle they are experiencing. We all know that silence can speak volumes. When you and I show up at the door we are telling them we care...without using a word.

Exploring Contemplative Prayer

We want to you be equipped to let God direct your life. A resource we are making available this year is a web course by Tracey Marx called Exploring Contemplative Prayer: A Nine Month Journey to the Quiet. This course will help you explore experience and reflect on eight different prayer practices. Not all of the prayer practices would be considered contemplative in the classic sense. But they are all ways to pray that take us outside the usual, more conversational approach to prayer, where we do much, if not all, of the talking.

The journey begins in September on the 1st of each month, from September 2011 to May 2012, you will receive an introductory email and online access to a copy-ready PDF document that contains: 1) A Welcome Letter; 2) Background (History & Theology) of the Prayer Practice; 3) A Step-by-Step Guide for Experiencing the Prayer Practice; 4) Suggestions for Exploring the Prayer Practice; and 5) A Journal for that Month.

The Schedule of topics include:

- . September: Preparing for Prayer*
- . October: Breath Prayer
- . November: Lectio Divina
- . December: Release Prayer
- . January: The Prayer of Examen
- . February: Contemplative Healing Prayer
- . March: Praying with Icons & Images
- . April: Centering Prayer
- . May: Silent Prayer

When I first starting learning this type of prayer a few years ago I thought to myself: *“I have a hard time sitting still. If I have to sit and pray very long, forget it!”* That is how I felt until I was introduced to contemplative prayer by Tracey Marx and Bob Webber. This course will guide you into a wonderful world of spiritual practices that help us slow down, relax at the feet of God, and absorb the love, grace, and wisdom that are waiting for us there. If you would like to sign up, just mark a prayer card and let us know by giving us your name and email address. If you do not have an email, give us your name and phone number and will we let you know how to get the materials each month.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, sometimes it takes stock market fluctuations, an earthquake, or a hurricane to make us realize that we are not in control. We thank you that you are in control and present in our lives. We thank you for your deep and ever-persistent care for each one of us. We are humbled by your love and thankful for your forgiveness and care in our lives. Help us to be present to you and others in quiet, healing ways. You have important work to do on earth. Please work in and through us to love the world. In Jesus Name we pray, Amen.