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Fellowship Among the Afflicted

Job 38

I

Perhaps reading from the book of Job today presents an opportunity for some honest reflection, if not lamentation. Because of Covid and the particular challenges facing congregations in returning to a regular life of ministry and programming, I feel very lost. I'm sure that's apparent to everyone who has worked with me and maybe you feel lost in all of this, too. There is much to be frustrated about right now. The seasons of the pandemic have been hard on everyone - certainly hard on me and those who work here at the church. Offering weekly worship services online was a draining experience. Because our staff worked so hard at it we made it look easy on the outside, but in reality it was a grind. I do my best not to complain in public forums - but, hey, we're reading the Book of Job. You know his story - how he has lost everything, his wealth, his family, his physical health. All he's got left are these three friends who come around to give him advice and solve his problems. Out of this alien, unlivable, intolerable whirlwind God speaks to Job. I'm supposed to believe that God is my whirlwinds too.

Another disappointment doing ministry online for so long was that it deprives us of the relational payoffs that make this work gratifying in the first place. Perhaps the most enjoyable thing about my job is shaking hands in the receiving line after worship. For 15 months we didn't do that a single time - and there are still so many people that I miss seeing in worship today. Maybe that

seems like a small and silly thing. But I cherish those brief, sometimes very awkward conversations. It's a time for welcome, for inclusion, for care. Those have never been throwaway handshakes to me, but one of the most important moments of my week. That receiving line is what gets me moving on Sunday morning - so when we aren't gathering for worship, or when people aren't here for worship, I really do miss seeing people there.

The pandemic has also meant that we've had to make some really hard judgments, often without very good information or reliable guidance. The congregation has been incredibly patient and supportive, but there have also been some very difficult and painful moments. I often feel that there is so much more that I should be doing. Or that there are so many things I should be doing differently. It's ironic that being a pastor almost always puts me in the company of other people and yet often I feel very lonely. I hope you don't mind me being so frank about all this.

II

So much of our experience since March of last year has been chaotic and uncertain, unstable in our footing, not sure which steps to take next. In biblical literature a refreshing burst of wind is usually associated with good things coming from God. The blowing wind is a sign that the Holy Spirit is present. God speaks to Elijah in the midst of a strong wind. But the wind blowing about Job is not a fluttering breeze. This whirlwind is a different category altogether. It's the wind accompanied by rain and surging seas. It's the kind of wind that knocks you over and sweeps you out to sea. Are we to believe that God is in that sort of wind - a destructive wind, a devastating storm?

It's worth pointing out that up until now Job has had quite a lot to say. His loquacious lamentations have carried on for weeks, rivaled only by the long speeches delivered by his friends. His complaints are endless and they have an

answer for everything. If only you had been more faithful, they say. If only you had been more righteous. You have apparently brought all this on yourself and it's in your power to change, they argue. Back and forth Job has quarreled with them, but at this point he is quiet. Like he's in the eye of the hurricane, the storm is still. His friend Elihu has the last word, and Job does not respond.

In her recent book *No Cure for Being Human*, Kate Bowler writes about how her long journey with colon cancer has weighed on her family and changed the way she and her husband communicate in their marriage. "There is nothing casual about our language now, nothing held lightly or ventured without evidence. We don't use words that might have to be unsaid or run back to hopes we've laid aside. There is fellowship among the afflicted and it is marked by silence."

What Bowler is describing is a spiritual shift in her family in the face of tremendous suffering and loss. In the first days of her diagnosis, her house was buzzing with family and friends cooking, cleaning, and shopping for her. Anybody who could do anything was offering what services they could. But as her journey with her illness stretched from six months to a year to two years, now to more than five years they relate to the uncertainty of it all very differently. There is a quality of quiet attending to one another. Being present, offering love. But there is a very different sort of energy - I would describe it as a calm and quiet determination - that grows beyond the battlestations taken when the alarm first sounded.

"What is it that you want for me to do for you," Jesus asks his disciples, his impatience with them beginning to show. "You do not know what you are asking," he says. Speaking from the whirlwind, God is also growing irritable with Job. "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding." So much of the pain we carry with us is uncertainty. It is the worry about what happens next; it is the wondering if we're doing enough, or if we're doing what we're doing right. My great spiritual desire is to know, to really know,

that I'm not ultimately letting these people down. But there is no such way for us to have that kind of assurance. If we knew we would not be living by faith, and it is the strengthening of faith that we are called to practice here. So God's response to Job is to remind him of our humanity. God's withering, sarcastic speech illuminates our finitude and limitations. The foundations of earth are God's to set; the margins of the seas are God's to determine. We are here to put one foot in front of the other. To live day by day without the full picture of God's design. "Faith is the conviction of things hoped for, the assurance of things unseen." Or as Paul says elsewhere, we are looking through a glass darkly.

To me this is one of the great themes of the book of Job. To accept our circumstances does not mean that we are happy with our situation. But we are able to be present to ourselves and to one another in a gentler way. What I'm talking about here is a shift in spiritual perspective. It's a movement from fixing what is wrong to attending to who is here. It's a shift from solving the problems to indulging the mystery of what is unknown and unknowable. It is a movement from demanding answers to cultivating faith. From what I've been reading and noticing, this is a spiritual shift that comes with time. It falls upon us in the silence of shared suffering.

None of this is really about me, but maybe it helps for any of us to speak from our own experience of this time. Coming to church is such an unfamiliar experience to us right now, and the customs we are following are changing week by week and month by month. There is so much about this time and our future that we don't know and cannot know. This is not church as we have known it in the past, but this is the community that we have right now. I truly believe that the people who are here are the right people. By God's grace we are here attending to each other and attending to this time. Amen.