

“Suing God”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
October 10, 2021

Psalm 22:1-15 and Job 23:1-9, 16-17

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

For three weeks now, we have wrestled with one of faith’s most challenging questions: Why do bad things happen? Why would an all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful God allow so much suffering? We tried to answer, explaining that bad things happen for the same reason good things happen—because God has endowed existence with freedom; God is love, and to love is to yield control, not assert it. (An important lesson on this day of domestic violence awareness; abusing and controlling another is never love.) We also considered how God responds to suffering. In place of power and control, God comes to us in Spirit, in Jesus Christ, and in the church to be Emmanuel—God with us—to suffer with us, to love us, and then, as the Living God, to plant a seed of hope.

But, you know, for all these explanations, I am not satisfied. Maybe you aren’t either. As philosopher and theologian James Smith writes, “We can’t think our way out of this mess.” Analyze all you want, and it’s still a mess.

That is especially clear on this day, when we stand with the one in three women worldwide who will be victims of violence in their lifetime. According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, every minute of every day, 24 people are victims of violence by an intimate partner in the United States. That’s more than 12 million people every year. Some of them—I know—are right here.

There is no explanation, no promise of better days, no eloquence or reason that can make that better. We shouldn’t be satisfied. We should beat our chests and scream at the sky that such evil exists. Dissatisfaction is the only hope we have of ending domestic violence.

That’s why I like the Book of Job so much. Job is a man who refuses to be satisfied. He’s Bruce Willis in *Die Hard*. He’s Mel Gibson in *Braveheart*, or *The Patriot*, or well, any Mel Gibson movie. He is unrelenting. His friends give him all kinds of explanations—reasons for the death of his children, his poverty, his sickness, and his loneliness—but Job refuses to accept them.

Job persists in his lament. While Job may not curse God, he does accuse God. He rails against God, yells at God, questions the God who allowed his children to die. We heard it today, in our Scripture reading, where Job says, “My complaint is bitter... Oh that I knew where I might find God... I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments.” He’s not Bruce or Mel anymore; he’s Julia Roberts in *Erin Brockovich*, and he’s bringing a class-action lawsuit. In chapter after chapter, he takes up the case of the orphan, the widow, the poor, the hungry, the oppressed, the aging, the one whose property is seized by the powerful, the ones who reap fields “not their own.”

He raises up the pain of the world and lays it at God's feet. And in doing so, he exemplifies a lost spiritual practice of Scripture: the practice of lament. To lament is to give voice, in prayer, to the deepest hurting parts of us: our grief, our anger, our fear and doubt, our pain and shame. To lament can be to call on God to help. But it can also be to argue with God, as Job does today.

God never silences Job. There are 42 chapters in the Book of Job. God doesn't speak to Job until the 38th chapter. For more than 30 chapters, God just... listens. Job thinks that God's silence is a failure to respond, but I think silence is God's response. Silence is space for Job to be himself and speak without judgment, only listening, only love.

We're not used to lament being heralded as a spiritual virtue, and yet, it appears over and over throughout the holy word of Scripture. There's a whole Book of Lamentation. More than one third of the Psalms are lament, including the one we heard today: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" The prophets lament. Jeremiah laments so much that he's known as the weeping prophet. Jesus laments, when he cries at the grave of Lazarus his friend, when he kneels in the Garden of Gethsemane, begging God to spare him, and when he quotes that same Twenty-Second Psalm from the cross.

There were so many times the editors and redactors of Scripture could have stricken these words of chaos and brokenness from the Word of God, but they didn't. Like Job himself, these words of lament persisted, and thus gave voice to the hurting parts of us, gave voice especially this day to the victims of domestic violence, who says with Psalm 22 that they are surrounded by enemies, bullied and wounded, rejected and blamed by their community.

By virtue of its inclusion in Scripture, we are told: Lament is holy. Doubt is holy. Vulnerability is holy. Resistance is holy.

Holy like Anastasia Vasilyeva. On January 27th, earlier this year, the Russian police stormed the homes and offices of political opponents. They knocked down doors, dragged people from their homes, and threw them in prison. When the police arrived at the home of Anastasia Vasilyeva, the leader of a prominent medical union, wrote one article, "she was ready. Not with her lawyer, or a suitcase packed for a spell in detention, but with a highly polished performance of Beethoven's 'Für Elise' on her piano; she had just reached the middle section when officials entered her flat. The doctor played on even as an officer read out demands that she surrender her phone and computer for inspection. 'You can applaud,' she told the officials, with a flick of her hair, as she released the last chord."

When I read the Book of Job, or Psalm 22, or any of Scripture's lament, I hear Vasilyeva playing "Für Elise." I hear resistance. I hear the insistence to name this wrong and refuse its control. I hear the voice of every victim of domestic violence. I hear the protest of every hurting person.

Think of this as our song. The world comes crashing in, bringing with it all its pain, and we sit down at these keys and play our song. Loudly, and defiantly. Or as Dylan Thomas said, we do not go quietly into that good night; we rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Are you worried that God's ego is too fragile and God might strike you down? God doesn't have ego. God won't break. The world threw everything it had at Christ, and still he did not break. Hanging on that cross, still, he said, "Father, forgive them." If the cross couldn't break God, surely our little legal case here won't.

Are you worried that to voice your doubt and pain you'll reveal a lack of faith? True faith is keeping nothing back from God. God doesn't just want the good parts. God wants everything. Yes, even your doubt. Even your rage. For this is what it means to love. Love is total.

True faith is to trust that you can show God all your hurt, and God will still love you.

Your hurt, your doubt, your anger—they don't weaken your faith; they strengthen it. Referencing the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel, Rachel Held Evans writes, "If I've learned anything from 35 years of doubt and belief, it's that faith is not passive, intellectual assent to a set of propositions. It's a rough-and-tumble, no-holds-barred, all night long struggle, and sometimes you have to demand your blessing rather than wait around for it."

God does not fear argument; God fears indifference.

In C.S. Lewis's novel *The Screwtape Letters*, a demon in the upper bureaucracy writes to a novice saying, "I once had a patient, a sound atheist, who used to read in the British Museum. One day, as he sat reading, I saw a train of thought in his mind beginning to go the wrong way. The Enemy [God], of course, was at his elbow in a moment... If I had lost my head and begun to attempt a defense by argument I should have been undone. But I was not such a fool. I struck instantly at the part of the man which I had best under my control and suggested that it was just about time he had some lunch."

To argue and lament is to be in relationship with God. And that, our demon says, is what tempters must avoid at all costs: get people to walk away, to eat lunch, to turn on the TV, to plaster a smile and stop caring. But, for the love of hell, do not allow anyone to learn to confront God.

For, to confront God is to engage God, and maybe even, see God and be redeemed.

So, hear ye, hear ye. The honorable Westminster Presbyterian Church presiding. Case number one: The people of earth v. God Almighty, aka the Lord, aka the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Call forth the prosecution. Let us begin...

Amen.