

“Life is beautiful”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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When Jenna and I buried our boys Ezra and Leo in the wet ground of Wilmington, Ohio, beside their great grandparents and their great, great grandparents, one of my aunts hugged me close and said, chokingly, “I can’t understand why two people who would make such wonderful parents are being made to suffer like Job.”

It’s natural that my aunt thought of Job. He is a father robbed of his children. So am I. But while I am so clearly surrounded by a supportive and loving community, Job is bereft of everything. He loses his herds and flocks, the roof over his head, his health, his standing in the community. Impoverished, his body covered in boils, Job becomes an outcast. His own wife tells him to “curse God and die.”

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. He describes a pain so complete, so consuming, that he longs, not just for death, but for oblivion. He wishes he had never been born at all.

One of the truths of the Book of Job is that life can be ugly. It can be terrible and unfair. Job knows this better than most. Having experienced four miscarriages and now the premature death of our sons, Jenna and I know this. The 30,000 women in the United States who lose a child to stillbirth, every year, know this. The person who grieves the death of a spouse knows this. The millions of Americans who may lose healthcare know this. The refugees of Syria and South Sudan and Iraq and Yemen know this. The person who sleeps homeless on the street, or who can’t get a job because of the stigma of incarceration, or who goes to bed every night hungry, knows this.

What can I say about grief that you don’t know already? Do I tell you about the nightmares that keep me up at night? The violent dreams where I’m running, running, but am too late. Where I am powerless to save Jenna, to save my children, to save myself. Dreams that wake, in sweat, to a reality not so different.

Do I tell you about the anger that burns me up inside? The tears that come unannounced? The weight of my body, of my mind, so heavy to move, to do the simplest tasks?

Do I tell you that I’m not the same person I once was? That something vital has gone out of me?

Do I tell you about the moment Jenna and I said good-bye to each other, thinking she too might die?

Where are the words for such things? Such terrors?

Job's friends try to find the words. But they come out wrong. They silence Job's pain and anger. They tell him it's his fault, not God's, saying Job must have sinned mightily to have warranted such suffering. It's not life that's ugly, they say; it's you.

Job admirably refuses to believe their lies. I say "admirably" because it is easy, all too easy, when you're suffering, to believe that *you* are the monster, not the world.

Job persists in his lament. It's not until the very last chapters that we hear from God. And this is important. Because God doesn't silence Job's grief. God listens. And when God does at last speak, God doesn't dispute what Job has said. Doesn't deny or even try to fix Job's pain.

Instead, God says to Job, "Let me show you the world through my eyes."

God reveals a desert—a wasteland void of human life—and dumps buckets of rain on it, lavishly wasting water just to see what might grow.

God shows Job the Leviathan and Behemoth, big lumbering beasts that threaten the world with chaos. God shows him the wild mountain goat, the desert donkey who refuses the call of the herder, the buffalo that will never plow a field, the bizarre ostrich. Scholar and author Ellen Davis writes, "All these creatures in the divine photo album have one thing in common: they are completely untamable. Every animal in which God glories is completely useless.... This God's-eye view of the world plays havoc with Job's notion of the way things ought to be—which is to say, sensible, well adapted to human purposes, and above all, predictable."

Job thought that if he lived a pious and righteous life—which he did—he would be rewarded. In his neat, manageable world, God was in absolute control. And so, for that matter, was Job.

But that's not the world God created, and that's not the God who created it.

All of nature evidences a profound and unpredictable freedom. I want to pause so that we take in the full radicality of this statement. It's so radical (at least for a Presbyterian) that I'm still wrestling with it myself. We are accustomed to saying that human-caused suffering is the result of God's gift of free will, which has been perverted. Hence, sin. But what the Book of Job is saying—at least through the eyes of Ellen Davis—is that God has built freedom into the very existential structure of the universe. The foundation for all creation, human and non-human alike, is freedom, is possibility.

This is not freedom for freedom's sake. This is freedom for love's sake. God so loves the world—its every contour, its every creature, its every sound and touch—that God unbinds the world's chain and relinquishes God's own control, even at the cost of God's own pain.

God's not just tritely telling Job that you can't have joy without pain, beauty without ugliness; no, God's telling Job something far more profound. God is telling Job what it means to be a father, to be a mother—what it means to love something so hard that you give yourself to it entirely and then unclasp the cage.

The God of creation, the God of the cross, is not an all-powerful puppet master, but a parent whose love is so extreme that it invites freedom, invites unknown possibility, even to the point of breaking its heart.

At the end, Job understands. He says that he has received that rarest of gifts in the Bible: he has seen God.

Seeing such profound love, Job chooses to do something so reckless and insensible that it could only be described as divine: he chooses to have more children. He opens himself to the possibility of more pain, more loss. He who had begged for his own death now creates life. He pours rain on a desert.

He names his daughters *Yemima*, meaning Dove; *Ketsia*, meaning Cinnamon; and *Keren-haPuch*, meaning Horn of Eye Shadow. These are rare and extravagant names in Hebrew society. They are silly and delightful and nothing like the old prudent Job.

And to these daughters, Job gives an inheritance. This is a major breach of social custom, even law, which required that the inheritance go to the sons.

Faced with the preciousness and vicariousness of life, Job—in the words of Ellen Davis—now “loves with the abandon characteristic of God’s love—revolutionary in seeking our freedom, reveling in the untamed beauty of every child.”

Life is God’s greatest gift and sacrifice for us, and as such, it is beautiful.

Job knows this. I know this. For I have held my sons, wrapped in linen, and felt their peace, their beauty, wash over me. I have felt laughter, even joy, slip back in. I have fallen even more in love with my wife. I have gone for drives through the country, and walks through the woods, and though at times, I have cried, and at times, I have yelled, I have also felt overcome with the beauty and awesomeness of life. I have prayed, and I have heard my boys answer—in birdsong, in sunlight, in mist over the water, in round pale stones, in arms wrapped around me, in others’ tears mingled with my own, in frail words that break from my mind.

And in butterflies. Butterflies showing up everywhere. Butterflies woven into Janet’s stole during Ezra and Leo’s funeral. Paper butterflies fixed to flowers. Butterflies on a wooden plaque with their initials. Two preserved Peruvian butterflies, a gift from friends who also lost a son—Levi. Butterflies on a painting we’ve had for years—six butterflies in total, the exact same number of our losses. A butterfly on the top of Castle Rock in the Adirondacks, appearing the very moment Jenna spoke Leo and Ezra’s names, swirling around us.

Butterflies even appeared in the book we had been reading to Ezra and Leo—*The Hobbit*. We were only halfway through when they died. Last Sunday, on Mother’s Day, Jenna and I finally summoned the courage to resume where we had left off—to finish the story for our sons. The wizard Gandalf has just left Bilbo and the dwarves. They’re alone, scared, walking through a dark forest, surrounded by unknown threats. Bilbo climbs a tree. He bursts above the canopy into

a blinding, beautiful light. And all around him are butterflies. Thousands of butterflies. I didn't remember that part.

Butterflies. Our boys, God, speaking to us. Of love. Of frail, brief beauty.

Earlier, I said that I am not the same person I once was, that I've lost something vital. That's true. But I have also gained something. Something I am only beginning to understand. I am a father. And I now know just how much sacrifice and just how much beauty are contained in that word.

Life is terrible, and beautiful. It is beset with suffering that cannot be explained or silenced. And yet it is a gift of the deepest love, an artery running from God to us, channeling strength... and the ongoing creation all around us.

My friends, dear ones, you have wept with me. Now live with me. **Amen.**