



“The Power of Protest”

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Job 23:1-9, 16-17 (NRSV)

Job is quite possibly the most misunderstood and misrepresented biblical character in popular culture.

Most of us are familiar with the characterization of Job as “the paragon of patience”? Am I right? How many times have we heard the expression, “So-and-so has the patience of Job.” Or, “I need to be more patient, like Job.”

News flash: Job was NOT patient!

Check out today’s scripture reading from chapter 23. Job was on rant. He was anything but patient. As they say on NBC Nightly News, “Hear Job now in his own words:

- ² “Today also my complaint is bitter;
God’s hand is heavy despite my groaning.
- ³ Oh, that I knew where I might find the Judge,
that I might come even to his dwelling!

Hear that? Job was furious. He had it with suffering and loss, and was furious that God was now “MIA,” and seemingly unavailable even to hear his complaint.

To fully appreciate the protagonist’s protest in chapter 23, it’s helpful to understand Job’s predicament within the larger context of the narrative in which this ancient Wisdom legend unfolds. Listen all the way to the end of the story to hear how the dominant Old Testament motif of God as judgmental and wrathful is overturned.

What follows is my “Cliff’s Notes” version of the book of Job, part of which we heard last week in Cheryl’s sermon. As you listen to my summary, listen closely to how Job’s actions are described as he faces hardships and how God’s response is described in the end.

II

There once was a man from Uz whose name was Job. He was a good man by anyone’s standard. He feared God, and did what was right, and he was greatly rewarded for his righteousness. In fact, Job was the most prosperous man in the

East. He was blessed with a healthy family, large herds, and plenty of money. Life was good for Job, until that was, the heavenly beings started meddling in his business.

One day, God asked Satan what he'd been up to.

Satan replied, "I've been wandering the earth."

"Really," mused God, "have you noticed my servant, Job? He's a really good guy. I'm very proud of him."

"As a matter of fact, I have noticed your servant Job," said Satan. "I know that you think he's a swell guy; but you know it's easy to be faithful when you're living the good life," observed Satan, "But strip him of his niceties, and see how faithful he is then."

"Ok," said God, "it's a deal."

According to legend, things went from bad to worse for Job. First he was stripped of his wealth. Next his children were killed in an earthquake. And finally his health was ruined. With each new loss, Job's fidelity to God was tested. His spirits were subdued, but his faith was not destroyed.

Job's suffering was compounded by his well-meaning friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar) who added insult to injury by assuming that his fate was the result of sin. Rather than consoling him in his suffering, his friends blamed Job for his calamity, and challenged him to search his soul and confess whatever sin had brought on his plight, so that he might be reconciled to God and be relieved of this divine retribution.

To his credit, Job rejected his so-called friends' analysis and advice. He knew he hadn't done anything to "bring on," his suffering. So eventually, his friends abandoned their efforts to extract a confession from Job.

When they finally left him alone, Job took his case to God insisting that his suffering was unfounded and demanding a divine resolution. When justice did not come, Job's lament continued.

So did God's silence. In chapter 23, God was described as a "no-show" for court. Job begged for an advocate who would plead his case, but none was forthcoming.

As Job's suffering continued unabated, he began to turn his anger inward and loath his own existence. He cursed the day he was born, and in 23:17, the last verse we read today, he prayed that he might vanish from the earth.

Further into the story, Job lamented that he had become the laughingstock of his friends, and that he was not alone in his plight. The wicked seemed to careen about the world raping and pillaging innocent victims without divine condemnation or intervention. So in further protest, Job brought a class action suit against God on behalf of all innocent victims, and charged God with “breach of covenant.”

In essence, Job argued that God had made a covenant with humanity to render justice and broken it.

Job protested further.

God remained silent.

Instead of an audience with the divine, Job was visited by “Elihu,” a new character in the tale who served as an intermediary between him and God. Elihu criticized Job for his self-righteousness. He denounced Job’s friends for their feebleness, and he chastised Job for challenging God. Then he went on to exult God’s goodness and majesty.

When Elihu completed his monologue, Job received his long-awaited message from God (Job 38)—but it was hardly the message that he had longed for.

God said to Job, “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” (38:4). “Where were you when I shut in the sea with doors?” (38:8). “Have you commanded the morning since your days began?” (38:12)

Job was humbled by God’s query, and left speechless; but God would not accept the silent treatment saying, “If you’re going to bring a case against me, Job, you will have to respond to my questions” (40:2).

“OK,” Job replied, “Point well taken. (40:4-5).

God pressed further: “Job, will you condemn me, in order to declare yourself just? Put on your royal robes and judge the proud, then I will acknowledge you. Look at the rhino. Can you make him? Can you draw out the devil, and contend with him?” Again, Job was humbled by God’s interrogation, and finally said, “OK, God, you’re right. You are the Creator, and I am the creature. You are able to know and do things that are beyond my capability and comprehension.”

So Job is put in his place, right?

But wait, there’s more to the story. It continues for another ten verses and ends with a curious turn of events and a very different depiction of God than we’ve seen earlier in Job and in most of the Old Testament.

In 42:7-9, Job's circumstances are reversed. God scolds Job's friends for "blaming the victim" for his suffering, and for claiming that Job's scourge was God's doing!

God demanded repentance—not of Job—but of his friends, whom God instructs to prepare an offering, and to invite Job's prayers for their forgiveness. The three friends did as God commanded. Job prayed for them, and they were forgiven.

Then, in verses 10-17, the last seven verses of the book, Job, was finally vindicated. His fate was reversed. His fortune, his family, and his health were restored and he received double for all that he had lost. End of story.

III

In the final analysis, we learn that Job was anything but patient. He was, in truth, one of the most impatient characters in scripture. He was impatient with his suffering and injustice, and most especially, he was impatient with God.

Rather than being the paragon of patience, Job is better understood as the *paragon of protest*. He resisted suffering. He rejected the analysis that suffering was his fault. He ranted at the ever-present and unjust suffering that surrounded him. And he demanded that God render justice on behalf of the suffering.

Job's laments echo the feelings that many of us harbor when we suffer, or when those near and dear to us suffer. Job's example encourages us to cry out to God, to protest on earth and in heaven, and to demand a different outcome. Job also shows us that God can hear our anger and does not abandon us, even though God may seem silent for a time. In short, Job demonstrated that there is power in protest.

When we pray our protests, God listens. When we take our protest into the streets, God is with us. When we refuse to blame victims and seek resolutions to suffering this side of heaven, we testify to God's justice.

This news may be ho-hum to people who experience the problem of innocent suffering as an intellectual curiosity, but for those of us who are part of the FESCO network—either because we seek FESCO services, or because we help make these services possible for others, or both—Job's story is a good news story.

It's a good news story, because Job reminds us that there is power in protest, that suffering is not our end, and that God can and God will hear, join us, and respond to our protests. May God help us to trust in the power and appropriateness of protest, so that we might unleash the passion needed to achieve the justice we seek for ourselves and for all with whom God has called into ministry. Amen.