

First Presbyterian Church
“A Long Talk with Annoying Friends,” Job 2:11-3:4; 8:1-7; 9:1-3, 14-19
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 10/17/2021

Would you rather have a friend with good intentions or bad intentions?

Good intentions, please!

Fortunately for you, most people do have good intentions.

And we can be happy for that – it’s a great place to start.

But we all know it’s not enough to guarantee a positive outcome.

Phrases like “She means well” or “their heart is in the right place”

or “it’s the thought that counts,” are all nice ways of saying the same thing:

There was a failed effort to help that produced
more harm than good.

This happens so often that we’ve got well worn phrases for the phenomenon.

Why is that? What is it that prevents good intentions from being enough?

What would enable these good intentions to become good outcomes?

If only Job’s friends had reflected on those questions,

he may have been spared some of the extra salt they rubbed in his wounds.

Well, you know ... they did the best they knew how.

Looking to our own time, we can see that people are people.

Just like we can find plenty of examples of undeserved

suffering in our own world which parallels Job’s suffering,

so we can find plenty of examples of well meaning friends
who end up doing more harm than good.

We’ll take some time to explore these texts together,

but at the end I want to come back to two questions:

First: What did Job’s friends miss that turned their good intentions
into unwelcome comfort?

Second: Where do we see the good news about God in the middle section of Job?

In the first scene we will explore from Job 2:11-13, Job’s friends arrive.

They’ve heard about the tragedy. They want to come and support Job.

Maybe they want to see if it’s really as bad as the reports have said.

Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar arrive and they discover that it was all true.
Worse than they had imagined, in fact.
They weep, tear their robes, and sprinkle their heads with dust.

In all of this, these friends are being good friends.
They share the depth of pain Job is experiencing and come alongside.

Then they go a step further.
They sit with Job. On the ground. In silence.
For seven days.
And seven nights.

Upon seeing his suffering, nobody says a word.

...

Then in chapter 3 Job speaks.
He's traumatized. He's anguished. He wishes he had never been born.

We read just a portion of this chapter, but I dare you read the whole thing
– this is a portrait of someone wracked by physical, psychological,
and spiritual torment.

At the end of the chapter Job cries out,
“What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me.
I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil.”
He is living a nightmare.

It's amazing to me that this is the same Job who in chapters 1 and 2
seemed so composed, so balanced, so accepting of these tests.
His first words were, “The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away ...
shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?”
And now he is crying out with all his being, “Why would God even give me life
if it contains such misery?”

Can one say both things at the same time?

...

In the third scene, the friends speak.

The friends did great to start out with – they proved that they were not mere fools, nor gawkers, nor swooping in to try and make it all better.

They came, they saw, they sat in silence for seven days and now
...they have some opinions they'd like to share with Job
if that's okay.

They share in order Eliphaz, then Bildad, then Zophar,
and after each one shares Job responds.

The conversation is somewhat repetitive and hard to follow, to be honest,
but it provides space for the reader to consider the many angles
of this astonishing thing that's happened to Job.

I read from Bildad's first statement in chapter 8 as an example.

Bildad opens up with a rhetorical question that makes
an incontrovertible theological point:
“Does God pervert justice?
Does the Almighty pervert what is right?”

Well, obviously not.

Bildad's point is that whatever has happened to Job,
it certainly can't be pinned on God.

And I agree! (But in order to agree,
I also have to hold the heavenly court scenes from
the beginning off to one side.)

If God were the source of unjust suffering, then God wouldn't be God ...
at least not as revealed in the Bible.

So who is at fault?

Bildad has an idea, and it stems from those raucous birthday parties
mentioned in chapter 1.

You may recall that Job's kids would feast and drink so much
that he made sacrifices for them in case they had
inadvertently cursed the name of God.

In 8:4 Bildad concludes, “When you children sinned against God,
he gave them over to the penalty of their sin.”

In other words, the mighty wind that swept upon their house
and collapsed the building upon them was no freak accident –
that was the righteous judgment of God against Job’s sinful children.

But for Job there’s a way out! v. 5, “But if you will seek God earnestly
and plead with the Almighty, if you are pure and upright,
even now he will rouse himself on your behalf
and restore you to your prosperous state.”

The implication here is that Job also has something sinister to repent of,
that he needs to come clean and become “pure and upright.”

But we know from the introduction of the book that Job is not a sinner –
he is “upright and blameless” and that he did not sin in his response
to these awful calamities.

This is, basically, what Job’s friends think.

- A) God is just and cannot do wrong.
 - B) God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked.
 - C) Job’s life has been ruined which looks a lot like punishment.
- Therefore: Job must be wicked.

It’s a pretty tight logical argument.

In Chapter 9, Job responds.

Job can’t argue with his friend’s description of God’s righteousness.
But he’s at a loss about how to move forward.
He knows he’s not done anything deserving of all this,
but who can call the Almighty Creator to account?

V. 3, “Though they wished to dispute with him,
they could not answer him one time out of a thousand.”

Job wants to know how a mere mortal is supposed to argue with God.

Over the course of the book, this complaint strengthens.

His complaint extends to his friends who have proved to be cold comfort through their insinuations against him.

For instance, in 13:13ff, Job tells his friends,

“Keep silent and let me speak; then let come to me what may.
Why do I put myself in jeopardy and take my life in my hands?
Though God slay me, yet will I hope in him;
I will surely defend my ways to his face.”

This is bold talk!

By chapter 25, Job’s friends are worn out.

Bildad only has a few lines utter,
and Zophar doesn’t even pretend at a final effort.
Job concludes with a long final reflection vowing to maintain
his innocence and integrity even as he compares his fate
to that of the wicked.

So those are the broad strokes of chapters 3 – 27.

Now let’s return to those two questions I asked at the beginning:

The first was, “What did Job’s friends miss that turned their good intentions into unwelcome comfort”?

In the end, Job’s friends never realized that they have a limited view of the world.
They spoke with vast authority about the character and justice of God,
but they never speak *to* God. Only Job does that.
They made too much of their (largely correct) insights about God,
and plastered over the important nuances.
Good intentions need to be matched with self-awareness, humility,
and honest spirituality rather than pious proclamations.
Good intentions are fulfilled by continuing to be with
rather than explain to.

The second question was: Where do we see good news about God?

I see it in the fact that Job holds two truths in dynamic tension:

his steadfast belief in God's goodness on one hand

and his insistence that he suffered without cause on the other.

He keeps these two together, declares a hope in God despite all his pain,
and demands a reckoning before God.

Rather than allowing his theology to dismiss his experience,

or allowing his experience to dictate his theology,

Job brings them both before God and says, "What's going on here?

Why is this happening?

How can your goodness and my undeserved
suffering exist together?"

The good news is that this honest contention with God is shown

to be more faithful than the easy answers suggested by Job's friends.

The way of certainty, proof, and easy answers is revealed

to be a sham that is usually employed to make one person
feel better about another person's predicament.

God's ways are far beyond our comprehension and *because of that*

we are encouraged by this book to see that when we lack clarity,

when we ask hard questions,

when we refuse to duck the difficult realities of suffering

we are truly on the journey of faith in the Living God.