

June 13, 2021

First UCC Northfield

Sermon Series Week 3: "I've Been Meaning to Ask...What Do You Need?"

Job 2:11-13

### Job 2:11-13

<sup>11</sup> Now when Job's three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home—Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They met together to go and console and comfort him. <sup>12</sup> When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. <sup>13</sup> They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.

### Sermon

Some of you may know that this week has been the virtual Annual Meeting of the MN UCC Conference. We were so lucky to have Susan Beaumont as our keynote speaker. Beaumont is the author of the book, *How To Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going*. She's long been consulting with congregations that are living in a liminal season: a space that is between something that has ended and something new that hasn't yet begun.

Beaumont spoke about being in a pandemic and not yet out of it. About being back together at church and also online. About being excited to worship together in person, and not quite ready to be together in person because, "wow, that pandemic was a doozy!" and people are still processing it. Liminal space, Beaumont says, is about having ministers, but also being between ministers in a church. About moving from an old way to a new emerging one. About purpose changing with the needs and call of a particular moment in time.

We talked about people in the Bible who were living in those in between spaces: Noah *on* the ark, Jonah *in* the whale, Paul *while* he is blinded or imprisoned. Liminal spaces, you may also gather, can be fraught. They are places between what was and what may be. They feel anything but settled, and they are mostly uncomfortable. What struck me when Beaumont was speaking, was when she said "God loves liminal times because they are times that God can act." To us they may be seasons of growth, change, loss or possibility. "People, though," she said, do *not* like liminal times because they don't necessarily feel good. They feel unsettled and awkward. Maybe they feel exhilarating, but they also feel terrifying."<sup>1</sup>

Beaumont talked about these places with the wider UCC, because we are all in that space right now. Yes, with different congregations, identities, contexts, and even values, but the pandemic has put us all in that in-between, liminal place. The place we've never been before. The place that feels uncomfortable because of the unknown; because there is grief and loss amid the change.

If there is one book in the Bible that knows liminal space, that knows loss and change, it is the book of Job. Written thousands (maybe 4,000?) of years ago by unknown authors, the book of Job is a parable more than an actual story. A parable is a story that is big enough to

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Beaumont, speaking to the UCC MN Conference Annual Meeting, June 12, 2021.

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walk around in, to try on, and usually does not have one meaning, but multiple meanings depending on how you read it. Job is a roomy story that dwells in lament and the meanings of suffering. Scholars<sup>2</sup> believe that the first chapters 1, 2 and the last chapter, 42, were the chapters written by an original author. The entire middle section from chapters 3-41—which is beautiful and complex poetry—came later. We are in chapter 2 today, one of the older parts of the book of Job.

As the story opens, Job is a man who did well in life, who was well intentioned and tried to do right. Yet he loses everything: his 10 children, his land, his livelihood, and his health. The entire book of Job is 42 chapters of liminal space. The book of Job is about the problem of human suffering; the question of why bad things happen to good people. But that question is never answered.

So let's move for a moment to a simpler question. "What do you need?" This question, as you may know, is our sermon series theme question this week: "what do you need?"

Job loses thousands of livestock and workers—his livelihood—then he loses all 10 of his children. If that weren't enough, Job loses his health and develops sores all over his body. Job tears his robe (pictured in your bulletin) and shaves his head in mourning. Then he sits in ashes tending his wounds in sorrow. His life, his family, and own body are falling apart. If only our culture allowed us to show our grief and hurt so visibly and in such an embodied way, rather than trying to keep it together. That's why asking this question is so important.

Now, make no mistake, in the next chapter (that we don't read today), Job cries out. He pleads and curses and yells at God for *many* chapters in haunting and tragic poetry. But in the scripture we have today, before all of that, we have Job's friends. Job's friends, who intuit what he needs: they hear what's happened and they leave their homes to go to him. They see how changed he is. So they go to console him. And they simply sit with him. They weep with him. They tear *their* robes and cover themselves in ashes out of solidarity. At seeing his great need, they set aside whatever was going on with them in their own lives. Knowing that there are no words for such traumatic loss, they sit with him, and no one speaks—for a week.

"In essence, this is what we all need—for someone to come quickly...and to simply show up."<sup>3</sup> Again, don't get me wrong. As some of you may know, Job's friends don't come out of this story well. Because after a week, instead of *asking* Job what he *needs*, they ask *themselves* what *they* think he needs. And *they* think he needs answers. So they start making up explanations for why Job must be experiencing such torment and suffering. They tell him he must've done something wrong. And they inadvertently inflict more pain upon Job as they tell him what he must've done to experience such suffering. It's excruciating, the bad theology and answers they load upon Job's already sagging shoulders.

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<sup>2</sup> Harold Kushner, *Job Commentary: When Bad Things Happened to a Good Person*.

<sup>3</sup> Rev. Remington Johnson, contributor, "I've Been Meaning To Ask" sermon series by Sanctified art

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After they sit with him, Job's friends don't ask, "what do you need?" They assume that what he needs is certainty; and they give it in an abundance of unsolicited advice. As Chris said at staff meeting this week, "with friends like Job's who needs enemies?"

But what's intriguing is that before they get it wrong, they get it so right! The *first* thing they do is get up to come to him. To sit with him. In silence and solidarity. They get it right at first and they're fully present with him in a liminal and traumatic time.

What do you need? This is a question that is wrapped up in Job's story. Job's friends intuit what he needs and the first thing they do is give him their presence amid his anguish. What do you need? It's a question Job's friends later *don't* ask, that would've been helpful and prevented a lot of pain. What do you need? It's a question that recognizes that we all have needs, and that we all need one another.

One of my favorite stories about needs and care is in Parker Palmer's book, *Let Your Life Speak*. In it, Palmer describes a deep dive into depression. He was sick for a long time with this particular bout of it. And he describes the times in which people meant to give him what he needed. He writes this:

*"I had folks coming to me, of course, who wanted to be helpful; and sadly, many of them weren't. These were the people who would say, "Gosh, Parker, why are you sitting in here being depressed? It's a beautiful day outside. Go feel the sunshine and smell the flowers." And that, of course, leaves a depressed person even more depressed, because while you know, intellectually, that it's sunny out and that the flowers are lovely and fragrant, you can't really feel any of that in your body, which is dead in a sensory way. And so you're left more depressed by this "good advice"....*

[Then he writes,] *"There was this one friend who came to me, after asking permission to do so, every afternoon about 4:00, sat me down in a chair in the living room, took off my shoes and socks, and massaged my feet. He hardly ever said anything — he was a Quaker elder — and yet, out of his intuitive sense, from time to time would say a very brief word, like: "I can feel your struggle today," or, farther down the road, "I feel that you're a little stronger at this moment, and I'm glad for that." But beyond that, he would say hardly anything. He would give no advice. He would simply report, from time to time, what he was intuiting about my condition. Somehow, he found the one place in my body, namely, the soles of my feet, where I could experience some sort of connection to another human being. And the act of massaging just — in a way that I really don't have words for — kept me connected with the human race."*<sup>4</sup>

What do you need? When we ask *ourselves* this, we give ourselves a chance to feel, to consider, to step back, observe, and care for ourselves amid whatever is going on. When we ask *another* what they need, we are giving them volition to let us know so that we don't assume and so we can respect one another's vulnerabilities and boundaries. When we *share* with one

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<sup>4</sup> Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, passage found on Krista Tippett's *On Being* website, accessed 4 June, 2021 <https://onbeing.org/blog/courtney-martin-sitting-alongside-suffering/>.

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another in answering the question, "what do you need?" we are acknowledging that we need one another. Whether we are asking ourselves, asking another, or sharing what we need—engaging in this practice is a way to love one another well. And when we love one another well, we give the very presence of God to one another when we love like this; for God is love.

In the book of Job, when Job's life fell apart, he feared that he had been completely abandoned or cursed by God. He feared that God had given up on him, or was punishing him. But God never left Job. In fact, God sat and listened to Job for 38 chapters of necessary and understandable yelling and screaming. Like Job's friends, God said nothing for a long time. God simply listened before responding.

Dear friends, we need one another: to sit in solidarity, to bear witness to our pain and our awkwardness and our joy. We need one another because we all experience liminal, uncomfortable, in between times. When we ask ourselves and one another, "what do you need?" whether times are dire like in Job's case, or they are simply uncomfortable, we are practicing compassion and living into the holy unknown. When we ask "what do you need?" we are saying, *we will go together* into that liminal space; we have each other. We have each other. And we have the love of God, as we hold each other up or sit and say nothing at all. We have each other while we trust in a Spirit that is moving us through even the hardest moments. Amen.

### **Benediction**

Beloved of God,

may God give you:

curiosity to counter assumptions,

vulnerability to reach out,

bravery to speak,

wisdom to listen,

and resiliency to love.

In the name of the Holy One

who is with us always, Love itself,

go in peace. **Amdn**