

ABANDONED BY GOD

Job 23:1-9, 16-17

A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham

October 28, 2018

Thirty-some years ago, the renowned *New York Times* editorial columnist Russell Baker published an autobiography that included his recollection of one stunning day when he was five years old, and his cousins found him playing in the woods and conveyed the awful news that his father was dead. Baker said of his father,

He was 33 years old. When I came running home, my mother was still not back from [the hospital], but the women had descended on our house, as women there did in such times, and were already busy with the housecleaning and cooking that were Morrisonville's ritual response to death. With a thousand tasks to do, they had no time to handle a howling five-year-old. I was sent to the opposite end of town to Bessie Scott's house.

Poor Bessie Scott. All afternoon she listened patiently as a saint while I sat in her kitchen and cried myself out. For the first time I thought seriously about God. Between sobs I told Bessie that if God could do things like this to people, then God was hateful, and I had no more use for Him.

Bessie told me about the peace of Heaven and the joy of being among the angels and the happiness of my father who was already there. This argument failed to quiet my rage.

"God loves us just like His own children," Bessie said.

"If God loves me why did he make my father die?"

Bessie said I would understand someday, but she was only partly right. That afternoon, though I couldn't have phrased it this way then, I decided that God was a lot less interested in people than anybody in Morrisonville was willing to admit. That day I decided that God was not entirely to be trusted.

After that I never cried again with any real conviction, nor expected much of anyone's God except indifference, nor loved deeply without fear that it would cost me deeply in pain. At the age of five I had become a skeptic and began to sense that any happiness that came my way might be the prelude to some grim, cosmic joke.¹

Reflecting on Baker's loss, theologian Burton Cooper later said,

¹ Russell Baker, *Growing Up* (New York: Congdon and Weed, 1982), 61-62. I am grateful to Burton Cooper and his article "Why God? A Tale of Two Sufferers," *Theology Today*, January 1986, 423-424 for pointing me to this account.

Baker lost more than his father that day. His experience of tragedy also cost him his childhood and his faith in a beneficent deity. He was only a five-year-old when his father died, but there was nothing childlike in his sense that “any happiness that came [his] way might be the prelude to some grim, cosmic joke.” He had not ceased believing in God; he had ceased believing that God was to be trusted.²

Such a sense of God may be an uncomfortable one to speak in church, where we are much more at ease with words of trust and promise like those of the 139th Psalm we spoke in our call to worship today, words of assurance of God’s providential love and care. But Baker’s words are not dissimilar from the words spoken elsewhere in the Psalms, or particularly by an ancient Israelite named Job. You remember the story, I suspect. Job, a blameless man, loses everything – his wealth and his children especially – and is afflicted with a painful disease that makes his body break out in sores. He is thus made “unclean” under Jewish purity laws and forced to leave the community. In a time when disease and misfortune were always blamed on some personal sin or wickedness, Job is fully perplexed. He knows he is blameless. And so he cries out:

Though I am innocent, I cannot answer [God] ...
 For he crushes me with a tempest
 And multiplies my wounds without cause;
 he will not let me get my breath
 but fills me with bitterness....
 I am blameless ... Therefore I say
 He destroys both the blameless and the wicked.
 When disaster brings sudden death,
 he mocks at the calamity of the innocent. (Job 9:15, 17-18, 21, 22-23)

We hear a lot about the “patience of Job,” but “patience” is the wrong word. “Torment” may be closer. “Bewilderment” might be even better. Though he refuses to curse God for the tragedy that besets him, Job does not hesitate to rail against God’s unjust treatment of him and to pray fervently for justice. In this morning’s text, he speaks of his desire to face God and find a hearing with God... and is frustrated by his inability to do so.

In search of God, Job sets forth on an imaginative journey to the four points of the compass. He turns to the east ... and the west then to the north ... and the south ... but the God he seeks is nowhere to be found. The sad result of his quest is reported in a sequence of deadening truths: “he is not there”; “I cannot perceive him”; “I cannot behold him”; “I cannot see him” (vv. 8-9).³

For most of us, says Barbara Brown Taylor, the worst that can happen is not to suffer without reason, but to suffer without God – without any hope of consolation or

² Cooper, 424.

³ Samuel E. Balentine, “Between Text and Sermon: Job 23:1-9, 16-17,” *Interpretation*, July 1999, 290.

rebirth. All other pain pales next to the pain of divine abandonment.⁴ Thus, Job's pain and loss are compounded by having to suffer alone, without divine comfort or aid

Theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff wrote a book some years ago called *Lament for a Son*, after his son's tragic death from a mountain climbing accident in the Alps. Wolterstorff is a faithful Christian teacher, but the torment he felt in those days was tortuously palpable, and so, Job-like, he gave voice to his lament:

How is faith to endure, O God, when you allow all this scraping and tearing on us? You have allowed rivers of blood to flow, mountains of suffering to pile up, sobs to become humanity's songs – all without lifting a finger we could see. You have allowed bonds of love beyond number to be painfully snapped. If you have not abandoned us, explain yourself. We strain to hear.⁵

We strain to hear. We strain to understand. I confess that's how I felt much of yesterday after the news from Pittsburgh of the shootings at the Tree of Life Synagogue.

Kate Bowler is a thirty-something theologian and church history professor at Duke Divinity School in North Carolina, who also is battling a terminal cancer. She chronicled the first year of her struggle in her recent book, *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*. As I mentioned in a *First Matters* essay, it's one of those books that will stay with you long after you put it down.

Kate was 35 and seemed to be living a dream. A wife and mother of a toddler son, she was also a rising star in theological education. But the dream fell apart when she was diagnosed with Stage IV colon cancer. Her book is a bold, funny, unsettling account of a journey through the questions, uncertainties, anguish and grief that attended that diagnosis and its aftermath. It seems to me that Kate wrestles with God, Job-like, straining to understand.

I used to think that grief was about looking backward, old men saddled with regrets or young ones pondering should-haves. I see now that it is about eyes squinting through tears into an unbearable future. The world cannot be remade by the sheer force of love. A brutal world demands capitulation to what seems impossible – separation. Brokenness. An end without an ending.⁶

Around the one-year mark of her battle with cancer, Kate sat down with her oncologist – a thoughtful and kind physician who shares her faith, and with whom she speaks frankly about the grief and the hopes of her life. She has questions about how long, particularly as it relates to her toddler son.

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Out of the Whirlwind," in *Home By Another Way*, Cambridge, MA, Cowley Publications, 1999, 166.

⁵ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmanns, 1987, 80.

⁶ Kate Bowler. *Everything Happens for a Reason, and Other Lies I've Loved*, New York, Random House, 2018, 70.

Will I see my son sprout up and [grow to adulthood]? Can I see him graduate and be launched into the world? How many times can I sit by his bed and watch his eyes squeeze tight as we thank God for tractors and the sticks we throw into the stream near our house. These are the plans I have made. These are the hopes that are being ground into dust....

“Don’t skip to the end,” [the doctor] said gently. “Don’t skip to the end.”

....

[I said] “I just need to make it to fifty. I need to make sure that kid is launched. I need to get most of my life *done*. I need to lock it down.”

“But it comes undone [he says]. There are so many times in life when we think we have it locked down.” We [sit in the] quiet again.

[He’s right, she says.] Plans are made. Plans come apart. New delights or tragedies pop up in their place. And nothing human or divine will map out this life, this life that has been more painful than I could have imagined. More beautiful than I could have imagined.

“Right. That’s the secret – don’t skip to the end,” I remind myself, sheepishly wiping my face on the sleeve of my sweater.⁷

In the midst of torment – and the world is full of torment – one cannot but wonder whether God is really at work for good. There are times when the best way to be faithful is to cry out with our own sense of grief and sadness and even forsakenness, to ask God to be God for the sake of justice and grace. Old Testament scholar Sam Balentine argues that Job offers us a model for doing just that:

Those who search for God with Job’s eyes will refuse to accept that this is the world God intends. They will not agree [with Job] that God has determined that human beings are simply “born to trouble.” They will not believe that faith must be forever construed as silent submission to injustice that terrorizes the innocent and subverts the moral foundations of creation. Like Job, they will take their lives in their hands, fill their mouths with arguments, and stubbornly insist that the absent God remain committed to a world that has the capacity to be “very good....” Until God speaks and settles these matters one way or the other, every steward of Job’s faith listens for God with ears attuned to the cries for help of the wounded and the dying.⁸

“Stewards of Job’s faith,” he said. Now, that’s a different kind of stewardship than the one we usually talk about around here, but it is no less important than the financial stewardship that keeps this congregation’s work and ministry alive.

⁷ Bowler, 159-160, 161.

⁸ Balentine, 292-293.

Among all the things I celebrate about this church – and there is much to celebrate and much to support – I am particularly grateful that First Church is the kind of place where issues aren't prematurely settled. I am grateful that it is a place where pious platitudes do not replace earnest wrestling in matters of consequence. I am grateful that it is, instead, a place where we can bring the world into our weekly faith conversation and contend with both the Word and the world, so that we can take our chiseled and honed faith back into the world. I am grateful it is a place where we *all* can strain to hear and, in the end, be supported by those who do. I think that is a fact of our life together that is worth celebrating. And I hope you will.

But back to Russell Baker for a moment: over the years he lost his ability to trust God in the wake of his father's untimely death, not only because of the event itself, but because his skeptical questions alienated him from the religious community. In the Book of Job, it looks for a while as if the same thing is going to happen, as Job's friends provide no comfort, as they try over and over to defend God against Job's questions and protests. But by the end of the story, Job's relationship with God will be restored. His questions are still substantial and pertinent; he knows he did not deserve his suffering. But he also knows first-hand God's holy and healing presence. He discovers that in the presence of God's love, his complaints can find a resting place, if not an answer. The experience of God's love, in the end, is enough.

Such an experience of love, of course, cannot and does not take away Job's pain of loss or his grief. The memory of the death of his family will haunt him all his days. The problem of evil still exists. The questions remain. They remain for Job, as they remain for us.

But Job does find healing, at least in part, when he lets go of his conception of God as all-controlling power, of God as enemy, of God as the one who crushes him. In the end, the God Job sees is the God who is friend, who is vulnerable, the one who is with him in his suffering and whose caring presence heals him. And Job lived centuries before Jesus, who made God's suffering love so powerfully clear. In the end, Job repents, and turns once again to hold fast to the One who holds fast to him. Says Burton Cooper,

[Job] does not repent of his concern for God's justice; biblical faith can never have enough of that concern. Job repents of his loathing for life, his sense of despair, his lack of faith in the goodness of creation. Thus, he is ready to return to life. He can love again, work, and have children. [And] he can die, as the text says, "full of days."⁹

I pray that the same will be true one day in the congregation of the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh... and in the flood-ravaged towns of North Carolina and the wind-battered Panhandle of Florida... and among those whose perilous journey fleeing from violence and death toward hope is mis-labeled a "dangerous caravan" ... and with those who face calculated, government-sanctioned disdain over their gender identity or sexuality ... and among those who, by scurrilous legal maneuvers, have been summarily

⁹ Cooper, 433.

disenfranchised... and with so many powerless and vulnerable people in this world. And I pray that, whenever tragedy or injustice or indignity strikes close to you, in time that you, too, can love and work in wholeness and peace again.

Until that day comes, we will seek to be the church to one another. We will welcome your questions and your skepticism, we will embrace you in your torment, and we will do what we can to be stewards of Job's faith and to mirror God's grace, so that all your anguish ... all your complaints... and all your distress can find their resting place at last in the welcoming embrace of God's love.