



“The Heartbreaking Call of Loneliness”

a sermon by

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Psalm 32 declares in faith to God: “You are a hiding place for me.” Killian McDonnell, a Catholic theologian and poet reflects on this psalm in poetry:

You can tell a good hiding place
by the way the shelves are stocked.
The cupboards are beyond breadth and length;
they are the chambers of God’s heart.

I bring my void here for filling;
it is my poverty God needs.
With my want the Lord builds palaces.
Gold bullion is never enough.¹

How is it that God uses our want, our need, and not our wealth, to build palaces of hope. What is it about our void, our emptiness that God blesses, when to us the experience of emptiness is terrifying?

Some of the deepest suffering we as humans experience is the suffering of loneliness. Not the occasional loneliness that we all experience at times, but a pervasive, on-going loneliness that leaves one feeling exiled, or permanently on the fringe, unable to connect with others and even worse, unable to find a connection to God. This is the loneliness of the Psalmist who cries out to God, “You hid your face; I was dismayed.” (Ps. 30:7b); the loneliness of one overcome with grief; the loneliness of one who has great wealth; the loneliness of one who is institutionalized; the loneliness of one who is surrounded by people but cannot find community; the loneliness of the prisoner; the loneliness of one trapped in the world of mental illness; the loneliness of one ostracized by a group; the loneliness of one whose heart has been broken.

When we think of suffering we often turn to the Book of Job. It was all taken away from Job – everything but his life, his three well-meaning but insensitive friends, and his wife, who herself told him, “Curse God, and die!”

In the beginning of the book of Job, the story is framed as a debate between God and Satan as to whether Job, a faithful and loving man, can remain faithful in the face of tremendous suffering. The question posed is one we all must ask ourselves at times: Job is faithful when all goes well. Can he be faithful when all falls apart? Now please don’t take this debate between God and Satan in an absolutely literal sense. I have a difficult time believing that God in God’s mercy and love would purposively inflict suffering on someone in order to satisfy a wager made with Satan. The book of Job is part of the wonderful wisdom literature of the Old Testament, literature that lifts up in plain and poetic language the deepest questions of faith we carry in our hearts. The story of Job is a vehicle through which these questions are asked and debated on many different levels: intellectual, emotional, and of course spiritual.

¹ Killian McDonnell, “A Place to Hide: Light On,” *Weavings*, vol XX, #2, March/April 2005, p. 25.

It is interesting to note that God is the one who initiates the dialogue with Satan, whom in the mythology of this story is part of the divine council of heavenly beings that are in God's court. The Hebrew word for Satan is adversary or accuser, and at the time that this book was written, Satan's job in the council of heavenly beings was to patrol the earth. The Lord in chapter 1, verse 7, asks Satan what he's been up to, or more to a point, "Where have you come from?" Satan's response to God's inquiry sounds rather like a guilty schoolchild, whose parent asks where he has been. Satan responds, "Oh, from going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." Can we be any more vague?! Then it seems like God sets Job up by asking Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job?", and God begins to praise Job's faithfulness and piety. Satan's response cuts straight to the chase – of course Job is faithful! He has everything. Try taking it all away and see what happens then – see if he is so faithful then. And so begins the sequence of tragic events that befall Job. Listen to this very bad day in the life of Job:

One day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in the eldest brother's house, a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were feeding beside them, and the Sabeans fell on them and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you." While he was still speaking, another came and said, "The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants and consumed them; I alone have escaped to tell you." While he was still speaking, another came and said, "The Chaldeans formed three columns, made a raid on the camels and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you." While he was still speaking, another came and said, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house, and suddenly a great wind came across the desert, struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they are dead; I alone have escaped to tell you." (Job 1:13-19)

What do you imagine became the worst part of this tragedy for Job? I imagine it would be the loss of his children, but closely tied and intimately connected to that loss, would be the deep pit of loneliness he found himself cast into.

I have known no such suffering as this man, Job. Perhaps you have, when you are hit by devastating news and not just once, but again and again and again, so that the fabric of your life feels ripped to shreds. I have known isolating loneliness; but, even in that, not with the brutality that Job faced. It is what we all try to avoid.

Being alone is very different than loneliness – many of us choose at times to be alone and find those times renewing and refreshing. But loneliness is generally an experience that is not intentionally chosen and that happens whether one is with people or not. Many of us are terrified of loneliness – it is alienating and in it we often come face to face with a place of emptiness and formlessness that feels like it may consume and destroy us. We encounter our greatest fear – that we are indeed ultimately alone and that life is without meaning or purpose. We call out to God and want to run to God as a child

to a Parent, but this God of the covenant seems far away in the distance, or even worse, absent.

In our Old Testament passage from Job this morning, we hear Job lament to his friends, whose attempts to explain his suffering make him all the more lonely. Job's friends are so afraid of what they are witnessing in his tragedy, that they grasp at platitudes and rationales for the evil that has befallen him. Yet, their words betray their own fear and horror of loneliness, as in their self-righteousness they distance themselves from their friend, Job. Bildad actually says to Job: "Surely the light of the wicked is put out, and the flame of their fire does not shine... They are thrust from light into darkness, and driven out of the world. They have no offspring or descendant among their people, and no survivor where they used to live. Surely such are the dwellings of the ungodly, such is the place of those who do not know God." (Job 18: 5,18-19,21) Believe you me, this is not how our Stephen Ministers are trained to respond to suffering! What Bildad does not want to accept is that rain falls on the godly and ungodly. It is frightening to think that even the most carefully crafted life can fall apart in a moment.

One of the worst parts of loneliness is the self-hatred that comes up. Maybe I am lonely because I am not worth being loved – by others and even by God. Now certainly, we all know of those who by their very behavior and attitude drive people away and are very lonely. We know people whose choose loneliness over relationships, because of their fear of relationships. We know those, who unlike Job, have committed some act that has been so hurtful, that family and friends drop away out of pain and betrayal. And yet, no one truly seeks loneliness and the on-going experience of it can be more devastating than just about anything. When Job pours out the depths of his lonely despair after Bildad's harsh proclamation on wickedness (Job 19: 13-22), Job uses within only 10 verses the following phrases:

...God has put my family far from me
...my acquaintances are wholly estranged from me
...my relatives and close friends have failed me
...the guests in my house have forgotten me
...my serving girls count me as a stranger
...I have become an alien
...I call...but he gives me no answer
...my breath is repulsive to my wife
...I am loathsome
...even young children despise me
...my intimate friends abhor me
...those whom I have loved have turned against me.

If it seems like too much to you, that is because it is; but to turn away from it out of our own fear and repulsion and horror, like Job's friends did, heaps despair upon despair.

The poet meditating on the verse from the Psalm that affirms, "You are a hiding place for me", writes:

I am running on empty down rattlesnake road
the edge of the word no longer cuts,
thirst too weak to draw from the well,
the bread from the altar cardboard tasteless.

I need more love than I deserve,
and flee to your hidden place for refuge.
I close the door against the cold,
but no one answers when I call your name.²

We can't run away from loneliness, because at some point in our lives it will catch up with us. Loneliness is a part of human experience and as such needs to be acknowledged, accepted, and expressed within our framework of faith. Now this is a curious statement, because it is that very faith that loneliness challenges the most.

Job rejected his pious friends' trivializations of his suffering – he was not suffering because he was wicked. One has to admire the courage he had in not caving into the pressure of their shallow, smug theology. He sought a deeper understanding and like Jacob, who actively clung to and wrestled with the angel of God all night, Job would not let go of God until God responded to his pain. Job was looking for redemption.

What is remarkable about the passage we read from Job this morning is that immediately after he pours out his heartbreak, an astounding affirmation of hope and faith follows – an affirmation that is captured in the beauty of Handel's Messiah. Listen carefully to these familiar words in the context of Job's great suffering:

For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin as been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me! (Job 19: 25-27)

What in the world accounts for this shift, from a lament of abandonment and desperation to a hymn of relationship and hope?

Job is willing to engage with God through all of his experience. Note that he even engages with God when he doubts God. The poet accuses:

You are here, but you turn your face away.
You switch off the one dangling light.
Discarded, I grope in the moist cellar.
I will run on empty, but I'm not leaving.³

² Kilian McDonnell, "A Place to Hide: Light Off," *Weavings*, vol. XX, #2, March/April 2005, p. 16

³ Ibid.

With the poet and with Job, we witness a process and journey of faith and from it we have much to learn. For Job, it is not a neat or consistent process for after his tremendous affirmation of faith, he settles back into his depression. Several chapters later, we read Job crying out about God's absence: "If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him." (Job 23:8-9)

Suffering and loneliness often confronts us with a choice: either isolate ourselves even more in our abandonment and sense of meaninglessness, and in our anger turn away from God; OR face God fully in our fury and desperation, and struggle and fight for a rebirth – a transformation - of meaning and faith. There is a death in this process, and this death is a death of our old way of seeing.

Morton Kelsey in The Other Side of Silence writes:

In many ways we human beings are like seeds that wait for moisture to break open their husks so that they can sink roots and begin to grow and develop, and this raises a real question. If we are like seeds in the way we have suggested, do we need to have the husks of our souls cracked open so that we can sink roots in the spiritual world and find direct contact with God?... Most of us would rather stay put than seek such an experience of growth. This process of allowing new life to open up is like death and resurrection for human beings. One gives up life to find a new way, like the seed that gives itself to nourish a living, growing plant.⁴

The remarkable thing about a rebirth of faith is that often one must use different language to talk about such a transformative experience. Job launches into soaring language about a redeemer, one that even after his skin has been destroyed will transform him so that, as he sings out, "in my flesh I shall see God." This is faith that reaches beyond the moment and is able to trust in that which cannot be seen or heard. If you are trying to reason this out, you might as well stop right now. One cannot reason this out any more than one can reason out the resurrection of Christ or this gift of communion that he left us. Normal language cannot contain the expression and experience of faith.

That is why the disciples just didn't get what Jesus was trying to tell them before he died – "In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live." (John 14: 19) These words could not be understood until the shadow and loneliness and desperation of the crucifixion cast its darkness upon them. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." (John 14: 27) There is the heart of it. The peace and faith that comes through loneliness and suffering – it doesn't come in the way or the time we expect – not in the way or the words of the world. It comes with sight that sees what can't be seen and words that say what is not understood by the comfortable. It most often comes to us in our emptiness and loneliness, for it is in these experiences that our hearts are broken open enough to hear

⁴ Morton Kelsey, *The Other Side of Silence*, New York, Paulist Press, 1976, p. 142.

God's calling to us. And with this call comes a promise: "Because I live; you also will live."