



# "Both/And"

a sermon by

Rev. Kathleen A. Crowe

First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, NC

October 18, 2006

*In loving memory of Stone Barnett*

This week we continue with the second of three chapters in our study together of the book of Job. Last time we looked at the beginning of Job's plight- the wager between God and Satan to see if Job's devotion to God was only circumstantial, or if it would persist if calamity came his way. In the chapters between our reading calamity certainly did come. In fact, all that he had was destroyed besides his wife and a handful of friends and yet he refused to curse God. And so now we pick up our reading in the pit of Job's anger over the injustice of it all, his confusion and his despair as he lifts his head now to offer a response to his friends who try to explain his suffering away by saying that surely Job is being afflicted because he was sinful and therefore simply needed to repent. But the reader and Job both know that this is not the case. Our reading comes to us from the 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter of the book of Job, all seventeen verses.

“Then Job answered (them): “Today also my complaint is bitter; (God's) hand is heavy despite my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling! I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. I would learn what he would answer me, and understand what he would say to me. Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; but he would give heed to me. There an upright person could reason with him, and I should be acquitted forever by my judge. “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. But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold. My foot has held fast to his steps; I have kept his way and have not turned aside. I have not departed from the commandment of his lips; I have treasured in my bosom the words of his mouth. But he stands alone and who can dissuade him? What he desires, that he does. For he will complete what he appoints for me; and many such things are in his mind. Therefore I am terrified at his presence; when I consider (it), I am in dread of him. God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me; If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!”

As I've mentioned before, as modern readers of this text, we can't help but burn for answers to questions that this book isn't really asking. The book of Job exemplifies the problem of evil, the reality of human suffering, and throws a plot in the face of the reader that rocks our sensibilities- an innocent man suffers because God has to somehow defend his honor to Satan who says that God's most righteous followers only love him for the benefits. So then we get stirred up about the agency of God, the nature of divine justice and goodness, on and on. It seems that this book stirs up an eternity of questions and utterly confounding issues for believers, but doesn't even pretend to be interested in offering us any solutions much to our chagrin. And so it is helpful now and then to take a step back, to know that these questions and issues deserve a serious and central place in the conversation about faith and God to be sure, and to seek the wisdom behind the answers that the book of Job does offer- answers to questions that we don't usually think to ask.

The book of Job is almost theatrical. It bases its story on an extreme premise, God and Satan wagering together, in order to highlight the drama of its characters in the aftermath and to draw out the lessons to be learned through them. And one of the primary lessons of the title character that the book seems to want us to grapple with and really does offer several answers to is quite simply that of the nature of discipleship and the inner workings of the life of faith. And so in our brother Job we get this fantastic blueprint for the response of a believer when their world is shaken to the core. A response that is as varied and complex as the very lives we lead. And one that is faithful.

In our passage today we hear the words of a man calling out of the depths of anguish and

grief. His life and family have been ripped away from him and slaughtered. His friends just won't let it go that his calamity has come from his sin when Job knows that it has not. And now Job has so clearly had enough that he pours out his heart for all to see and just look at what he says, it is astounding! In a few breaths, just a few short verses, he speaks rage over the injustice of his suffering, frustration that the Lord is no where to be found, confidence that God knows his heart, devotion to the rituals of his faith, love for God's Word, helplessness in the face of his suffering and fear, utter paralysis in the face of a power that is so very much in God's hands and out of his own. And despair. He also speaks despair, "God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me; If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!" Who would imagine that Job, held up as the model of faith and steadfastness and spiritual integrity would look like this? But there is a reason they call the book of Job wisdom literature.

I'll never forget one of the first truly heartbreaking conversations I had as a pastor. A woman sat in my office with a wadded up tissue in her hand and between sobs confessed that she thought she was losing her faith because she was angry at God and questioned what was happening in her life. She believed that God was the source of all hope but felt dejected. She knew God had to be out there but for all she could see he was no where to be found. So she had come to the conclusion that the complexity of her feelings meant that she was losing her faith. It was heartbreaking because it was one of those moments when you realize how truly starved we are for the wisdom of Job. A wisdom that says that in the vastness of God's creation extremes of experience will be held together in tension within a singular lifetime and the life of faith is no different. It is paradoxical. It is confusing. It asks us to embrace the fact that our Christian walk requires the wisdom to allow the tensions intrinsic to life and discipleship to take their place within us. Tensions that pastors learn to speak of as the 'both/ands'. That is, that at any given moment faithful people may feel both the pain of being pruned and the joy of new growth. Both absence of God and knowledge of his presence. Both insecurity when your world is shattered and at the same time confidence that it is being renewed.

But this is not just the wisdom of Job. The ultimate witness to the power and the potential of this wisdom can be found squarely and centrally in the cross. That terrible and wonderful place where both doubt and hope, sin and righteousness, injustice and redemption, brokenness and healing are pulled together from the farthest reaches of their extremes in our understanding and in their power and become one in the body of Jesus Christ. Where all at once both suffering and salvation meet. Power and humility, servant and king. Elation and despair. Radical intimacy with God, and 'my God, why have you forsaken me?' It is at the cross where all things that seemed to stand contrary to one another ultimately meet and at their intersection there resides the salvation of the world. <sup>1</sup>

Perhaps it is human nature to amputate and isolate those things within ourselves and our world that we fear so that we don't ever actually have to acknowledge that they are a part of us and we them. And I am afraid that the same is it is often also true in our journeys of faith. We run into anger or rage, injustice and doubt and automatically assume that there is no room for it in God's created order within us or that it is the work of evil. That good woman in my office was taught to believe that the complexity of her feelings signaled the death of her faith, but the book of Job, the witness of the Psalms, and virtually every prophet and piece of wisdom literature in the entire Bible and the cross of Jesus Christ suggests that, quite to the contrary, this complexity is very much a part of the life of faith. And to deny them or to miss the opportunity of an honest look at these complexities within us is to rob ourselves of the fullness of our expression as faithful disciples struggling in an often profoundly difficult world, and it is to deprive the kingdom of God

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<sup>1</sup> Roland E. Murphy, *The Lectionary Commentary*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2001, p. 265-267.

of the fruit that is born when we dig deep into the creative work that these tensions require of us, and face their consequences openly and with a heart that is willing to be changed.

This afternoon in about an hour I am going to the funeral of a friend. A 33-year-old man whose body succumbed to a ravenous cancer about five months after his diagnosis. About eight months after his marriage to another friend. Who lost an older sister to the same illness two years ago and whose younger sister is now showing symptoms of the same and needs your prayers. And when I think on his face and his family I feel despair. Injustice. This man is innocent, in a trial, Lord, this would never stand. I feel hurt and confused. Futile in my prayers. And yet also peace. Certainty of God's presence. Confidence. And hope. This is what we mean when we talk about the cross. That place where the body hung in agony was where death was crucified. And so the cross that was once the shape of violence now stands in our sanctuaries and hangs around our necks as a symbol of hope and life because in Jesus Christ the tears, the heartbreak, the injustice, the suffering, the hope, the prayers, the grave all of it has its place because the final word belongs always and only to God. And that final word is life. Life now. Life in death and even suffering. Life in its complexity. Life everlasting. Life that is meant to be lived and felt in all of its fullness. All of it.

I love our closing hymn today because it shares such good news in the minor key. And so while the song does end it never quite feels resolved but instead leaves us lingering in the tension which I think is appropriate because the good news it shares is Christ, the Lord of the universe, laying aside his crown, suffering, and dying on a cross for the sake of the blessed redemption of our souls. This is good news in the minor key. So also is the truth that faith is larger than all hope and all joy all the time. That the wisdom of Job in part is that complexity will persist all our lives. That life is more serious than we sometimes feel we can survive but God is with us. And when the time comes for the tensions of our lives to finally meet their resolve the Lord will be waiting in his glory. A glory delivered to us through cross of Jesus Christ which stands still as our strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow. Amen.