

# Beauty, Freedom, Healing, and Wisdom

*A sermon on Job 42:1-6, 10-17 by Nathan Nettleton, 24 October 2021*

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## Message

After horrendous suffering and loss, the most courageous and ultimately transformative response is to reinvest in life and love with passion and hope.

## Sermon

If the book of Job is about what most people say it is about,  
then it is incredibly disappointing.  
Biblical commentators and preachers alike  
will tell you that it is about the problem of suffering.  
How can a loving, powerful God allow indiscriminate suffering?

Certainly that is a question that Job asks.  
He asks it over and over.  
And certainly it is a question that his friends try to answer  
over and over.  
They tie themselves in knots trying to answer it,  
asserting over and over  
that God does not allow indiscriminate suffering, ever;  
but that suffering is always a deserved and appropriate punishment  
for terrible sin  
measured out by a perfectly fair God.

But at the end of the book,  
even God says they were wrong.  
God does not need us to be defending God.  
And whenever we get caught up in trying to defend God,  
we are probably no longer taking seriously the suffering  
of those we think we are trying to help.  
God has big shoulders  
and doesn't need our protection.

If you are wanting the book of Job  
to resolve this puzzle  
about whether suffering is always a punishment  
– and if not, why does God allow it? –  
then the final scene in the book  
is especially disappointing.  
Because after most of the book has rejected the idea  
that good fortune or disaster  
are reliable indicators of what we deserve,  
the final scene could be read as saying  
that that belief was right after all.  
God was so pleased with Job's passing of the test,  
that Job then won the lottery  
and was rewarded beyond his wildest dreams.

Read as though it was supposed to be  
a proper theological answer to that question,  
it completely undoes itself.  
But it was probably never intended  
to be such an answer.

The book probably *is* about  
finding a path of hope and life  
for those afflicted by terrible suffering,  
but I haven't observed any real hope or life  
coming to sufferers  
in the form of a theological defence of God's justice.  
Human need just doesn't work like that.

I've had a Job episode,  
although to be honest  
my "suffering" paled into insignificance next to his.  
But it was real enough to me at the time.

My first marriage ended when I was only 24,  
when my then wife went out one night with a work colleague,  
had sex with him,  
and started packing up her things and moving out the next day.

Like Job, I had grown up believing  
that if I was careful to always do the right thing,  
God would reward me  
by ensuring that things worked out well for me.  
But my marriage had just ended,  
and I was pretty sure I hadn't done anything to deserve it.

Like Job, I sat in my misery for weeks,  
screaming angry questions and accusations  
at the God who had let me down.  
Being the idealistic religious zealot that I was,  
a lot of those angry questions were theological questions,  
but looking back,  
I really don't think that careful theological answers  
would have helped at all.  
What was in play was bigger  
than the right way to think and talk about God.

Like Job, the answer that came for me  
was not really an answer at all  
in those theological question and explanation terms.  
Like Job, the answer that came for me,  
came as a vision of God's presence with me.  
I'm not claiming some miraculous supernatural vision.

I'm sure it was just a picture in my head,  
in my imagination,  
though it did seem pretty real at the time.

As I sat slumped on my floor,  
all out of words, almost out of tears,  
too exhausted to even maintain my rage,  
I saw Jesus walk into the room,  
sit down on the floor beside me,  
put his arm around my shoulders,  
and burst into tears.  
He didn't even say anything.  
He just sat there, with his arm around me,  
sobbing his heart out.

And none of my angry theological questions mattered anymore.

With the benefit of more than thirty years hindsight,  
I would say that there was a theological shift in that moment,  
in which I went from thinking of God  
as external to our world and our suffering,  
just looking in and pulling some strings,  
to recognising God as being inside the experience of suffering,  
as being a fellow sufferer.

But I couldn't have identified any of that at the time,  
and I wouldn't have cared to.  
All that mattered to me at the time  
was to discover that Jesus loved me  
and that he was hurting as much as I was,  
and for much the same reasons.

Unlike Job, I didn't then immediately win the lottery,  
become obscenely wealthy,  
go on to have ten children,  
and live for another 140 years,  
although the jury is still out on that last one  
if I can just hang in there for another 107!  
I did win the love lottery second time round,  
but like many who object to the ending of the book of Job,  
I know that that is far from guaranteed to all,  
and I hope I never take my beautiful wife and daughter for granted.

Job's experience is a bit more interesting than mine  
and while I'm one who has often been dismissive  
of the opening and closing scenes  
that have a completely different style to the rest of the book  
and were probably added later,

I'm coming to see that, though different,  
they do give some really valuable insights into Job's story.

All the middle part, most of the book,  
is the in-the-moment stuff,  
Job in the midst of his suffering.  
But it is the opening and closing scenes  
that give us some before and after,  
some insight into how Job's intense suffering  
and his even more intense encounter with God  
change him as a person.  
The Job of the final chapter,  
is a very different man  
from the Job of the opening scene.

The Job of the opening scene,  
for all his undoubted integrity, piety, and righteousness,  
appears to be a deeply anxious and timid man.  
He's terribly afraid of things getting out of control  
and going wrong,  
and he deals with his anxieties  
by trying to maintain control, cover all bases,  
minimise risks, and keep a tight grip on everything.  
This is a guy who we are told  
regularly offers sacrifices on behalf of his adult children  
in case they have done anything wrong.  
Not because they have sinned, or when they have sinned,  
but *in case* they have sinned.

Just imagine for a moment what it would have been like  
to have been one of Job's children  
back in his pre-disaster days.  
Maybe you don't have to imagine,  
maybe it was your reality,  
but if not, imagine what it is like  
to have a highly anxious, religiously obsessive parent  
who is so fearful of even the possibility of sin  
that they watch over your every move  
like a moral police helicopter,  
shielding you from every suspect influence,  
compulsively offering sacrifices in case you have sinned,  
and probably expecting you to be pathetically grateful about it.

A big part of what is often going on for people like that  
is that they believe that God is like that.  
They believe that God is obsessed with control,  
and is hung up over every little detail of our behaviour,  
and takes no joy in anything  
except the most rigid and meticulous compliance.

When you believe that God is like that,  
you are naturally afraid of upsetting such a God,  
and you quickly end up just like that yourself.

But by the end of the book, Job is completely transformed.  
Somewhere in the devastating suffering  
and the awesome encounter with God,  
there is something that completely changes Job  
and sets him free to be a very different man.

I think for Job,  
and I know for me,  
there are two aspects to this change,  
a dismantling, or even destruction,  
and the building of something new in the cleared space.

The personal disaster  
– my marriage breakup,  
Job's far greater horrendous losses –  
if it is big enough  
it will do the dismantling, the destruction.  
For Job (and this happened for me too)  
his whole world view came crashing down around his ears.  
The rules that he believed had been governing his life  
simply didn't work.  
They failed.  
What we thought were immutable laws of the universe  
about how God worked  
and how things would go for us  
if we were faithful to God,  
turned out to be total hogwash.  
They might work sometimes,  
but they sure as hell didn't work when we most needed them to work,  
so they could never be trusted and relied upon again.

The reconstruction for Job  
comes in the encounter with God,  
who addresses him from a cyclone.  
We heard this, not tonight,  
but in last Sunday's reading,  
and in our readings at morning prayer during the past week.

It often perplexes us,  
because we can't see the connection  
between Job's questions and God's answers,  
but that is mostly because we keep getting caught up again  
in expecting theological answers to the theological questions.  
That's not what Job gets,

and it probably wouldn't have helped him much  
if it had been.

The Word of the Lord that comes to Job out of the storm,  
and I encourage you to go back and read it (chapters 37-41),  
is a breathless rhapsody  
about the wonders of the untamed natural creation.  
And what is most striking about it  
is to hear how God exults  
in the wildness of it all.  
Over and over, God describes wild creatures  
that are exciting and wonderful,  
but which have no apparent value to human affairs.  
But unlike the anxious cautious parent Job,  
the Creator God is whooping and hollering with joy  
over the untamed craziness and abundance of it all.

Of all the wild things God describes,  
only one can really be domesticated by humans,  
and even of that one,  
the warhorse snorting in anticipation of action,  
God says, don't kid yourself for a moment  
that you can master him!

Unlike Job,  
God is no anxious helicopter parent.  
God seems almost drunk on the joyous wildness of it all.  
An extravagantly beautiful, totally beyond control, creation  
where many things go wrong  
and other things go wonderfully but unpredictably right  
does not fill God with trepidation  
and a need to overcompensate  
and obsessively try to reassert control.  
That wild, gorgeous, untameable creation  
fills God with enthusiasm and rapture  
and a burning unquenchable love.

So, in a nutshell, God's question to Job seems to be,  
"Can you love what you cannot control?"  
Indeed, "Can you love without needing to control  
or trying to control?"  
"Can you generously love what is free from your control,  
and rejoice in its freedom?"

At the bottom of his depression and despair,  
this really is a life or death question for Job.

I look back on my own gut-level reactions to my marriage breakup  
and I realise that a big part of it

was a less than admirable desire to possess and control,  
and the feeling of shock and outrage  
when my wife proved herself to be her own person,  
not owned by me,  
and free of my control.

Many people,  
and this is probably especially true of men,  
respond to any grief and suffering  
by trying to reassert control  
over everything and everyone around them.  
That's the story behind many domestic violence perpetrators:  
a need to tightly control, through fear and violence if need be,  
to ensure that no one can ever hurt them again.  
Even where there is no physical violence,  
many men who have been deeply hurt  
wrap that hurt tightly around them like security blanket  
and become bitter and resentful  
and spiteful toward any who have hurt them  
or who they fear might hurt them.  
They will never again risk the vulnerability  
of loving without tight control.

This is by no means only true  
of the pain of broken relationships.  
A tragic death,  
a sudden or chronic illness,  
losses in major disasters, fires, floods, etc,  
years lost to a pandemic and its control measures;  
any of these can leave us deeply wounded  
and desperate to protect ourselves  
against any and every further pain  
by wrapping our pain around ourselves  
and obsessively trying to control everything  
so that no new pain can penetrate.

But God speaks to us from the cyclone:  
"Can you let go and learn to love what you cannot control?"  
"Can you risk the love that could wound you at any moment,  
and so set yourself free  
to love with the wild abandon and generosity  
that your Creator God loves with?"

It was said by and of the WWII holocaust survivors  
that their greatest act of courage and hope  
was to begin having children again.  
When you have seen the worst that the world can dish up,  
and you have learned that there is nothing you can do  
that can ensure that it never happens again,

choosing to reinvest in the future  
is an act of crazy hope.

The same could perhaps be said of us right now.  
We are living through a global pandemic  
and the scientists tell us  
that it won't be the last one,  
and that probably, they will become more frequent.  
We are also living through the tipping point  
of a global climate catastrophe.  
The two are doubtless connected.  
This is not a safe world to bring children into.  
But in truth, we have never known a safe world  
to bring children into.  
We've just learned to live with the risks,  
and invest in the future with hope anyway.

The challenge God issues to Job  
is not just to trust enough to have children again  
after knowing the devastating pain of losing his children,  
but to have them,  
and trust them to make their own way in the world,  
a world that Job now knows he can't control,  
and has to give up trying to control.

The signs that Job achieved such a courageous freedom  
are a bit hidden in the English translation  
of the reading we heard tonight,  
but they are certainly there.  
Actually the other thing that hides them  
is some assumptions we make  
about what is just patriarchal rubbish in the story.

How do we know that Job was a changed man,  
that he broke free of his obsession with control  
and helicopter parenting?

We are told that Job and Mrs Job  
had seven more sons and three more daughters,  
and that the three daughters  
were the most beautiful women in all the land.  
And perhaps it makes you angry that then, as now,  
a woman's beauty seems to be the thing  
that gets all the attention.  
But hang in there,  
because you're probably trying to control the narrative  
and missing the point.



Don't overlook the cultural shock value.  
We are told the names of Job's three daughters,  
but not of his sons.  
That is bizarre in the ancient world,  
almost unheard of, even in the Bible.

We are also told that Job gave his daughters an inheritance  
along with their brothers.  
This too is pretty much unheard of,  
a shocking departure from the cultural norms of the day.  
Daughters were provided for by marrying them off,  
not by giving them a cut of the inheritance  
normally reserved for the sons.  
The only circumstances  
in which a father might have given his daughter an inheritance  
was if she was considered unmarryable.  
Which is why we are told that Job's daughters  
were the most beautiful women in all the land.  
Well resourced suitors were queuing up  
to ask Job for the hands of his daughters.

But Job, who used to be  
such a timid and cautious upholder of social conventions  
and traditional righteousness,  
breaks with all expectations  
and gives his daughters an inheritance,  
effectively liberating them from any need to depend on a man,  
either him or a future husband,  
and trusting them to enjoy their freedom  
however they choose to live it,  
free of his control.

But there is something else going on  
with the naming of these beautiful women too.  
It is already radical and unconventional  
that we are even told their names,  
but the names themselves are quite unconventional  
and certainly not the kind of names  
that the the old helicopter parent Job  
would have chosen.

These are sensual names,  
a little risqué even.  
One of them is a beautiful bird,  
one of them is a fragrant spice,  
and the third one is a cosmetic, a type of eye shadow.  
It's almost like he named his daughters  
Lingerie, Lipstick, and Cleavage.  
These are not the kind of names given

by a timid, over-protective father  
in a world afraid of beauty  
that kept women veiled,  
subservient, and under control.  
Perhaps it would be just as much of a shock in our world  
where we want to be free of the veil  
but still reinforce the old controls  
by outlawing the appreciation of physical beauty  
and cancelling the offenders.

But Job is a changed man.  
After tragedy broke his delusions of control,  
of being able to manage the world  
and socially engineer the future for his children,  
an encounter with the living God  
and the radically different parenting style of this God  
has given Job a new vision of his own place  
in the wild, beautiful, untameable world.

And this newly liberated Job  
is raising strong, bold, beautiful, independent daughters  
who will never be owned or dominated by any man  
but who are free to give themselves away  
freely and confidently as they wish,  
able to trust and rejoice in their own beauty,  
in their own liberty,  
in their own resilience,  
in their own power to make their way  
in a wild, untameable world,  
far from immune to tragedy and trauma  
but equipped to keep rising from the ashes  
and throwing themselves back into life  
with passion and wild hope.

So come to the book of Job  
with complicated theological questions  
about the justice of God and the nature of free will  
and you will almost certainly come away disappointed.  
You'll find all the questions,  
but no clear answers,  
just like life really.

But come to the book of Job  
looking for the wisdom for life  
that can emerge from tragedy and suffering  
and you just might strike gold.  
And as our world limps towards an unknown future,  
crippled by pandemic  
and under the ominous shadow of climate catastrophe,

it is wisdom for living through and beyond disaster that we need,  
not the illusory certainty  
of the kind of defensive theological answers  
that Job's friends tried to push on him.

Wisdom comes when we let God ask the questions.

"Can you relinquish your illusions of being able to manage the world,  
and love generously what you cannot control,  
love without needing to try to control?"

"Are you ready to drop the comforting cloak of your pain,  
and risk everything on a wild and irresponsible hope  
at the invitation of a God of resurrection."

Wisdom is born in the struggle to say yes to those questions,  
and to live that yes with courage, hope and generosity.

#### **Acknowledgement**

This sermon is greatly indebted to the insights in chapter 10, "The Sufferer's Wisdom" in the book *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* by Ellen F. Davis (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2001)