

Sunday August 1, 2021
 Lesson 9: Worship
 Scripture: Job 1: 8-20

Context:

This week we begin our last section with the unit Respond with a focus on themes in the book of Job, found in the Old Testament. Each week's theme will help us learn how to respond to God as we discover how Job interacted with God. Today's theme is on worship and how lament should play an integral role in corporate worship.

Of all the books of the Bible, Job is perhaps one of the most challenging books in the entire canon. Job falls in line along with Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon, whose content and perspective differ from the rest of biblical tradition.¹ Most of the books of the Bible, especially those in the Old Testament, focus on theodicy, a divine justice where God is operative and is in favor of the lives of those claimed by God, whether they are individuals or nations.² These three books offer a different perspective, bringing issues of dissent to the belief of God as just and fair to those who suffer. This issue underlies most of the book of Job.

The book of Job is not just connected to the Bible. There are several near Ancient Eastern parallels such as the fragmentary Sumerian text, "Man and His God," a narrative containing an individual who laments to his god of how he has become a social outcast and suffers from physical and psychological distress as he acknowledges humans are intrinsically sinful and asks that his own inadvertent sins be forgiven.³ There are two Babylonian poems, "I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom," and "The Babylonian Theodicy" containing narratives of men who ponder suffering and why the gods do not respond.⁴ Another text is "The Protestation of Guiltlessness" from the Egyptian Book of Dead where individuals make protests of the sins they have not committed as they were judged by the deity Osiris.⁵ Finally, there is "The Man who was Tired of Life," an Egyptian text where an individual engages in a conversation and dialogue of his soul in a time where there is upheaval and social disorder.⁶ All of these reveal how human suffering has always played a role in questions to the divine.

The figures we meet today include God, the Adversary, and Job. The Adversary translates to the title Satan, someone on the divine council who begins a conversation with God. The end result is the testing of the patience of one of God's most righteous individuals as we read of all the initial calamities to befall him.

¹ Michael D. Coogan, ed. *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: University Press, 2011), 471.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 473.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 474.

Application

The scene closes with a haunting image. After learning of how Job has lost nearly everything he owns, he is told of the most devastating loss of all. The house with all of Job's children has collapsed and a messenger has arrived to tell him of the death of all of the children, no survivors. Job rises up, tears his clothes, shaves his head, falls to the ground, and worships God.

Upon an initial read, we might wonder why in the world Job falls to the ground to worship God. Often, we think of worship as a celebratory event, as it should be. There is joy in singing hymns and gathering to hear the word of the Lord. Receiving the sacraments is a joyous moment where we feel a rush of emotions as we are given such holy, mysterious gifts. When we worship, in the words of Bishop Pennel, we have a foretaste of heaven on earth where the holiness of God brings us to awe and wonder.

Yet worship is also about *liturgia*, the work of the people. It is in worship we glorify God, we are also reminded of our own mortality and our frailty as humans. The words we say and the responses we give remind us we are not God and there is a vulnerability as we gather together as a community of faith.

In the Old Testament, an integral aspect of worship was lamenting, naming the human pains before God. This is why if you visit the Holy Land, you will see in the museums (and gift shops), tear vials. In the ancient days, people used to carry around tear vials to hold their tears as sacred especially in the wake of the death of a loved one. It was common to hire people to mourn for funerals. And of course, the prophets spoke of coming before God in grief and pain.

In many ways, these acts are counter cultural to being North American Christians. We must deal with the fact of how Americans often like to be seen as happy-go lucky people, always full of joy and on the go. There is a fierceness to press forward and to always search for what makes us happy or feel good. If someone in your family dies, you get your three days of burial leave and then you are expected to show back up to work, ready to go.

Some of this is of course expected to go forward with life. Yet the same culture has crept into the church and at times leaves us unable to fully grow in Christ. At times we are led to believe you must show up with it all together, ready to hear of the word of the Lord, making sure you're up to date on your salvation or there's a life application for you to fix every issue in your life. You're expected to smile, to be happy to be there. If your church "does it right," you might even have a good coffee bar or musical group to keep you entertained.

What we have lost is how lament is integral to worship. Lament is a part of the Christian tradition. From the Old Testament, we have seen examples such as these where Job comes before God in pain as well as David leading in a poem of national mourning when Saul and Jonathan are killed in battle. From the New Testament, we remember Jesus weeping in the course of the death of Lazarus and of course his recitation of Psalm 22 from the cross as Jesus cries out to God the Creator.

As a result, we should have space in our worship where we lament. It's in the recitation of the psalter where we cry out to God for help. It is the morning prayer where we lament how we have contributed to the schisms and polarization of the body of Christ.

And it is why we sing reflective hymns or songs where we pour out our hearts to God. It is why every worship service where we receive Holy Communion, whether contemporary or traditional, should possess some prayer of confession where we lament before God of how we have sinned and not loved our neighbor.

As we learn to lament in worship, we learn how to lament in life. We learn it is okay to cry when you are upset and it is okay to call out to God in a prayer which goes all over the place. We find how lament helps us to grieve and find a way to come to better places in dealing with our sadness, anger, and grief. Over time, we learn how lament helps us to heal.

What is a way your community of faith laments in worship? Have you ever been a part of a service where lamenting helped you to experience God in a new way? Why do you think people resist lamentation in worship? What are ways you individually lament in your personal spiritual disciplines? How can lamenting lead you to new places in your spiritual journey?

Rev. Dr. E. Hunter Pugh
Pastor of Brantley – Brunson Chapel Charge
PO Box 71
Brantley, AL 36009