

LEARNING TO WALK IN THE DARK

Dark Night of the Soul

Job 3:1-9, 20-26

March 23, 2025

A word of confession. I have been preaching regularly now for two decades, and yet an exhaustive search of my files and my memory reveals this truth. I have never preached on the Book of Job. I have read it. I have studied it. I have taken and even led classes on it. But I have never preached it.

Now, in my defense, Job is a complicated book. It is filled with layer upon layer of meaning, layers that do not easily reduce down to sermon-length summaries. But that's true of other texts I've nonetheless tackled in my preaching. And so, why no Job?

If I were asked to describe my deepest longing as a preacher, I would say something like this: *I long for the words I write and deliver to shed light on the truths found in scripture, to offer relevant reflection for our context, and to provide a measure of hope for those who listen.* Every single Sunday, on my way to the church, I pray for you. I pray for all of you, but especially for one individual I have in my mind and heart each Sunday. The one in a spiritual wilderness. The one who is, at that very moment, wrestling with an excruciating decision with far-reaching implications. The one who rises early from bed with a troubled heart or a grieving soul. The one who, at the moment I am praying, is trying to decide whether or not it is all worth it, whether or not they can go on. I pray that you will come to this place, and I pray that what you find here will recharge your depleted spiritual battery. That you will find hope. And so, maybe this is why I have never preached on the Book of Job.

Well, if we're going there, we might as well dive in deep. The third chapter of Job records the most searing lament in scripture. The words of a faithful man in the depths of despair. We know why. In the preceding two chapters, Job—righteous and once prosperous—has lost it all,

lost everything. First his wealth, then his children, and finally even his health. Disaster and violence have left him destitute, and those closest to him offer no comfort. Quite the opposite. In Chapter 2, his wife urges Job to "curse God and die." His so-called friends insist over and over again that he must have done *something* to deserve all this suffering. So, not surprisingly, Job seeks solitude. Alone with God, he gives voice to his pain. He raises the thought that it would have been better if he had never been born.

Why is life given to one bitter in soul? Why is light given to one who cannot see the way?

The questions on Job's heart are both personal and universal. They are the questions asked by any one of us who has experienced unthinkable loss. The questions voiced by those who hear the cries of people in distant lands and wonder how God and humankind could be so numb.

The rawness of Job's lament is uncomfortable to read. He refuses simplistic explanations that aim to solve the mystery of human misery in tidy language. Instead, his lament tells the truth of his experience.

I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; I have no rest; only trouble comes.

I am not at ease. I have no rest. Have you been there? Maybe you have woken at 3 AM with an anxious mind that will not let you rest. Maybe you have lost someone dear to you far too soon, and your prayers have turned to silence. Maybe you've surveyed the state of the world—war, injustice, and cruelty—and wondered where God is in all of it. Maybe, like Job, you have wondered why light and life are given only to be taken by darkness and death.

If you have ever been there—if you are there now—you're in good company. There's Job, sitting right next to you in his own dust and ashes. Centuries after Job, another voice took up this struggle. The Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross, described it as *the dark night of the soul*. It is a time of disorienting uncertainty, a time when the presence of God vanishes, and faith feels like just another burden too heavy to bear. These dark nights cannot be avoided or bypassed on the journey of discipleship. Our path goes right through them. What they offer instead is a fearful invitation—an instigation—to enter more fully into a true relationship with God. John of the Cross teaches that these dark nights strip away our illusions and teach us that God cannot be held, grasped. In other words, that God is not in our control. Someone recently sent me a great line about a mutual friend of ours with a larger-than-life persona. He wrote, "*You don't meet Jimmy. He happens to you.*" God happens to us. The God of the universe is not just another thing for us to grasp and hold. God happens.

John insists that these dark nights are intended not for our punishment, but for our liberation, that they are designed to free us from our worldly attachments and the ideas and idols that we easily substitute for God. Whether or not they *feel* like liberation, the witness of scripture suggests they provide a pathway to spiritual wholeness. That precisely by emptying us of false promises and lesser gods, they open space for the terrifying presence of the one true God, the only one who can save us.

The late theologian and beloved Wabash College professor William Placher had a term for our attempt to tame the God beyond our control. Placher called it, "the domestication of transcendence." In layman's terms, we make God too small. We shrink the Almighty to fit our expectations. We shape faith into something predictable, manageable, useful to our ends. We worship not the God of the universe, but an idol of our own making. Small enough to grasp and hold.

You see, a domesticated God is no God at all. A God who only exists to affirm our desires, or bless our ambitions, or sanction our power is not the God we meet in Job or in the rest of scripture. And when awe and wonder

disappear from our spiritual lexicon, when we no longer believe ourselves accountable to a truth greater than our own stories, we open the door to moral collapse.

Because when we domesticate transcendence—when reverence for divine authority is replaced by idolatrous self-interest, when the virtues plainly commanded in scripture are wantonly disregarded—we can justify all manner of immoral means in pursuit of selfish ends. As the prophet Jeremiah described the powerful in his time: "Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? No! They have forgotten how to blush."

And so have many among us. When power is unchecked by accountability, cruelty inevitably takes hold. It leads, ultimately, to nihilism. Belief in nothing outside our control. The frame is progressively narrowed to include only our needs and desires. And so, the most vulnerable—AIDS patients across oceans, hungry children in school cafeterias, refugees fleeing war and persecution, neighbors lacking shelter in our city—they are all outside the frame. Their suffering is ignored. And we don't even blush.

Friends, human power may have reached unthinkable heights, but power divorced from virtue is a deadly and dangerous weapon. Only God is transcendent. And God's justice will hold all to account. In the dark night of the soul, our limitations are laid bare, and God happens to us.

I have never preached on the Book of Job because God's silence in the face of suffering is difficult for me to take, much less explain. I want answers. I want a measure of hope from the heavens that I can pass along to you. Job cries out and God does not answer for thirty-seven chapters. God is present, but silent. When a divine response comes, it is spoken from a whirlwind. It comes in the form not of an answer, but a question.

Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Where were you, Job, when I laid the foundations of the earth?

Friends, this is the God who refuses domestication. This is the God you will not tame and cannot control. God will make no defense before a mortal human.

No simple explanation of suffering. No outline of the divine plan.

When Job is finally given a moment for rebuttal, he does not argue. He surrenders. *I see now that I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me.*

You see, Job has walked through the dark night. He has been face-to-face with transcendence, and he no longer demands answers; he embraces mystery. His suffering remains unexplained, but he has met the living God. And that is enough. He will trust what he may never understand. He will live by faith, and God will walk with him.

I have never preached on Job before, but it's a good time for us to remember him. Job's story is our story. The life of faith is not all shining light. It will lead us through valleys of darkness and nights of doubt. We will question God's power and God's mercy. We will wonder why the wicked prevail and the just are made to suffer. And in that silence, we face a stark choice. Will we trust the One whose power made the world, whose ways are beyond our understanding, or will we fashion and grasp at impotent idols of human creation? This is not a rhetorical question.

In our darkest night, may the path we walk and the choices we make reflect our faith and not our fear. Amen.