

Job, Blind Bartimaeus, and God
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Job 42:1-6, 10-17; Mark 10:46-52

When I was in elementary school, one of my favorite times during the week was the class' trip to the library. The librarian would gather us all on the carpet for story time before turning us loose to browse the stacks, listen to audio books on the bulky tape players with headphones which seemed to swallow up our heads, or sometimes to do art or a puzzle based on the day's book. One of the favorites of my second grade class was *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. It's about a boy named Alexander who can't seem to catch a break. He wakes up on the proverbial wrong side of the bed, with chewing gum in his hair because he forgot to spit it out before he went to sleep the night before, and things just go downhill from there. Literally everything that can go wrong for him, does. He has a bad day at school; his brothers pick on him; dinner was his least favorite food; and even the family's cat chooses to sleep on someone else's bed. And the only thing Alexander wants to do is move to Australia, where things just have to be better. Some days are just like that, Alexander's mom tells him at the end of the story, even in Australia.¹

We're winding up our surface reading of Job this morning. As we know, Job's story is all about his terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. Before we even get to the end of the first chapter, Job loses everything, including his material wealth and his ten children; his friends Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite (the shortest man in the Bible!), and Zophar the Naamathite are not helpful, as they parrot the party line of

¹ Judith Viorst and Ray Cruz, Illustrator. *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. New York: Aladdin Paperbacks, 1972.

“clearly you screwed up!” instead of just sitting with him; and even his wife gets in on the act by telling him to “Curse God and die!” as he’s sitting in the middle of an ash heap and trying to scrape lesions off his skin with a potsherd. But, Job cannot do any of these things. He’s a righteous man. And when he does question God, the answer he gets back is essentially, “Who do you think you are compared to ME, who made the world, including you, silly human?”

It’s here, at the very end of the story, that we learn this experience has changed Job’s perception of God. It’s also forced him to reframe the terms of his challenge to God. What Job has learned is that “...It is the awareness of God’s presence that transforms.” What the story itself actually does is to overturn the idea that suffering is the lived experience of God’s judgment – as in, you’ve messed up, so God’s going to punish you. Instead, it suggests that the end result of human suffering is that we learn something from it, whether that’s how not to be a friend, sometimes asking why isn’t going to provide the answer we might be looking for, and that God is in fact there in it with us.²

None of these explanations is really all that satisfying – and neither is the “he lived happily ever after” type ending which at some point got tacked onto Job’s story. Sure, Job gets all of his property and flocks back. He and his wife even have ten new children to replace the ones who died. What isn’t here is any information about whether, or what, Job may have learned in the course of his suffering, or even if God was able to give the Accuser an “I told you so!” We are told nothing about Job’s dead children, or

² Dale P. Andrews, “Pastoral Perspective: Job 42:1-6. 10-17.” In *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17 – Reign of Christ)*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 195-197.

how he copes with the trauma of losing them, or even what his wife must have thought about all of it. And, I for one have to wonder why his extended family returns only after he's been made whole. Did they even have a shred of sympathy for him in his ordeal? Or did they treat him the same as his so-called friends did, spouting unhelpful platitudes when what he needed was for them to just shut up and affirm him?

One of the truths of Job's story is that alleviating suffering is not as easy as waving a magic wand and saying "poof." It's also not necessarily as easy as having the faith that blind Bartimaeus, the star of today's Gospel reading, has. We know this from our own lived experience of suffering, and from the very real consequences it has for us and for the people around us (and, in this preacher's opinion, anyone who tries to tell you otherwise is not being truthful!).

The point of both stories is that human misfortune, and how we respond to it, are more about who God is, who Jesus is, and what that means for us as God's people than they are about anything else. In Bartimaeus' case, the context of his story within Mark clues us in to what Mark wants us to take away from it. Bartimaeus, along with an episode back in Chapter 8 where Jesus restores someone's sight, bookends the last stages of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. In between those two healing stories, Mark sandwiches Peter's confession and Jesus' subsequent rebuke; Jesus predicting his death three times; and the debates about greatness.³

What this "sandwiching" does is to highlight what we are supposed to learn along this journey to Jerusalem: that our vision, when we actually SEE someone for who and what they are, is not limited to what's literally right in front of us. That is, a full

³ Andrew McGowan, "The Sights and Sounds of Bartimaeus." <https://abmcg.substack.com/p/the-sights-and-sounds-of-bartimaeus> [accessed October 22, 2024].

understanding of who Jesus is and what he's about has to include everything: the healings; the teachings on hospitality and how service is the mark of greatness; and that the Son of Man must be betrayed, killed, and raised. To say anything less about him is to miss the totality of who he is – a fact which, somewhat ironically, the blind men whose sight Jesus restores understand before Jesus even does what they ask of him. At the same time, Peter, James, John, and the rest seem to struggle with that, despite their status as part of Jesus' inner circle. And yet, Jesus doesn't give up on them.

As for Job, he too has realized that he has a lot to learn about God. For God's part, God never answers directly the questions of "Why me? And why are you silent about it?" as Job asks them.⁴ Maybe there isn't an easy answer – at least, not one that makes sense outside of Job's narrative framing of "the Accuser dared God to try to get Job to break." As bad as an aftertaste as it leaves in my mouth, it serves to drive home an unpleasant truth: Sometimes things just happen, and there is nothing else we can do except cry out to God for help, and have faith that there is some sort of solution, even if that solution doesn't necessarily look like we think it ought to.

So what can we DO about it when faced with situations like Job's, or even Bartimaeus'?

The first thing is to name it for what it is.

The second thing is to be present with, and for, the people who are going through it. Rule Number One of that type of situation is to stop talking. Otherwise we become like Job's friends Bildad, Eliphaz, and Zophar, whose words are more about the anxiety

⁴ Gary W. Charles, "Pastoral Perspective: Job 42:1-6. 10-17." In *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17 – Reign of Christ)*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 196-198.

THEY are feeling in this situation and not actually about trying to help Job through the suffering he experiences.

The third thing is to have faith, as Job and Bartimaeus both did, that God is still present, no matter what our circumstances might be – and, God may deliver a surprise or two along the way. It's this last point I would encourage all of us to hang on to over the next several weeks as we go through the election and whatever its aftermath might be. No matter what happens, we will need to remember that God loves the world, and God loves us, and we are to treat each other accordingly. In the face of all the nastiness that's out there right now – and will likely continue to be out there, regardless of who wins – it is the only way. As Michael Curry, whose term as Presiding Bishop ends this week, has often reminded us: to respond in love IS of God, and it is there that our commitment as followers of Jesus lies.