

Crying Out

Scripture: The Book of Job

Faith Link: We can tell God when we are sad or hurting.¹

Let me tell you about a man named Jay. He was a good man. Everyone who knew him thought he was honest and friendly and generous. He seemed to be able to get along with almost everyone he encountered. When relationships became strained, whether business or personal, he did what he could to make things right.

Jay and his wife owned a carpet manufacturing business. They worked hard to make their production as friendly to the environment as they could. The business provided a generous income, and they were able to invest the surplus to provide for their future. They sent their children to college and were looking forward to seeing them have families of their own.

Jay spent time everyday reading the Bible and praying. He thanked God for all the blessings in his life. He asked forgiveness for any sin he or his family may have committed. He asked for guidance in his business, financial, and personal decisions. Jay and his wife attended worship regularly, volunteered their time, and gave generously to charity.

Jay was living the American dream. He was morally virtuous, spiritually pious, and blessed with family, wealth, and the respect of his peers. Life was very good.

And then one summer, everything changed. A tornado destroyed his factory. During the storm his home on the river was flooded. As his children hurried home to help him, their car was struck by a truck that ran a red light and everyone was killed instantly. As Jay tried to take stock of his finances, he discovered that his financial advisor had been running a Ponzi scheme. All the money he had saved for his retirement was gone.

In the midst of his shock and grief, Jay developed a mysterious rash all over his body. The doctor had trouble diagnosing the cause. The prescribed medicine offered Jay very little relief from the itching and burning.

Jay was in anguish. He couldn't believe all the terrible things that had happened to him in the course of one week. And yet, somehow, he maintained his faith in God, saying, "I didn't have anything when I came into this world, and I won't be able to take anything with me when I leave. God gives and God takes away. I'll continue to praise God as long as I live."

Jay's wife soon reached the end of her rope. She asked him, "How can you still maintain your faith? Maybe it's time to let go of God and give up."

But Jay refused to do what she suggested. "Should we take only the good things that come our way," he countered, "without taking the bad things?"

Jay had three longtime friends named Eli, Bob, and Zoe. When these three friends heard about Jay's misfortunes, they traveled to his home to comfort and console him. By then, Jay had fallen into deep despair. They were greatly distressed by the physical and emotional state in which they found him. On the first day, there was little conversation. Most of the time, they sat with Jay in silence. On the second day, the conversations started.

¹ The sermon is drawn from Week 7 of "Seeking God Together" from *Current*, a curriculum from MennoMedia, [Current - Menno Media](#); Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year B*, Trinity Press International, 1993, pp. 317-318, 428-429, 435-436, 448-449; Douglas E. Wingeier, *Keeping Holy Time: Year B*, Abingdon Press, 2002, pp. 322-323, 328-329, 334-335, 340-341; and Mayer Gruber, "Job," *The Jewish Study Bible*, Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 1499-1500.

Jay began by wishing he had never been born. He talked about the struggle that life is and how fleeting it is. Jay reported that these misfortunes were too great to bear. He didn't have the strength to wait for deliverance. He wanted God to take him now before he said anything bad about God. He would be better off dead.

Jay recognized that true wisdom and real power belong to God. He stated that since God is so great and powerful, a mere mortal couldn't defend himself before God. Even though Jay thought he was innocent of any wrongdoing, he repeatedly asked God to tell him why he had been condemned; to tell him what he had done wrong. He also asked his friends to tell him specifically what mistakes he had made. He continually stated his innocence. He refused to confess any sin that he didn't commit.

Jay wished there were an arbiter between him and God so he would have a chance of winning his case before God. He concluded that God destroys both the guilty and the innocent. Even more, some guilty persons go unpunished; they prosper and live long lives. He had hope that someday after his death, there would be someone – perhaps God – who would vindicate his suffering.

After listening to Jay, his friends spoke.

Eli responded by reminding Jay of the times he had instructed other people during their troubles. Eli firmly believed that the innocent are rewarded and the guilty are punished. God had a reason for Jay's misfortunes, there's a reason for everything. Eli recalled many examples of how God punished the guilty and helped the innocent and needy. He was convinced that Jay had sinned. By the end of the discussion, he accused Jay of great moral failure – of undermining religion and of thinking of himself as better than everyone else. He advised Jay to accept the discipline from God, ask God for mercy, and wait for God's deliverance and restoration. He assured Jay that God would hear his prayers.

Bob spoke next. He began by asserting that God is always just. Anyone who is punished must have done something wrong. Just like Eli, Bob had many stories of how the wicked get what they deserve. If Jay repented, God would restore him to his rightful place. Jay needed to remember what has happened throughout history. He needed to remember that the guilty will get what they deserve, but God will not reject an innocent person.

Zoe added to the conversation with the assertion that Jay's claim of pure conduct must be wrong. In fact, God probably was not punishing Jay as much as his actions warranted. If Jay would get rid of the hidden sin in his life and reach out to God, then his troubles would disappear. Zoe told Jay that the success of the wicked is short lived; they soon feel the full brunt of God's anger and get what they deserve.

What began as a pastoral visit ended in bitter argument, accusations, and rebuttals. After Jay's friends left, he felt worse than he did before they came.

Again and again, Jay cried out to God: "Oh, how I wish things were like they used to be. When everything was going well. When my children were here, and my business was strong. When I helped the people who needed help. When the community would listen to what I had to say. When I knew you were with me. I can't understand why this has happened to me. God, why is this happening? Why doesn't it seem like you're hearing my prayers? Why aren't you doing anything? Why can't I feel your presence? Why are you punishing me? Why?"

And then Jay heard God speak. He couldn't explain how he knew, he just knew it was God. And God said: "Who are you to be questioning me? Let me question you. Where were you when I created the earth? Who put the stars in the sky and contained the water in the ocean? Who created the sun that causes the day to begin? Have you traveled to all the corners of the earth? Do you know all the mysteries of life? Can you make it snow or hail? Who created the plants and animals? Who provides food for the birds and the fish? Who orders the seasons? Who knows everything about creation? Who?"

After Jay's intense encounter with God, he spent a long time thinking about everything that had happened. He couldn't remember all the questions God had asked, but he knew that most of the answers were "No, I can't do that, God, but you can" or "No, I wasn't there, but you were." Jay remembered how he felt in God's presence. He knew there was nothing he could say that would be a match for God's wisdom and power. Eventually, Jay fell to his knees:

“Mighty God,” he prayed, “I know that you can do everything and that no human can thwart your plans. When you asked, ‘Who is this ignorant person who questions my wisdom?’ I know you were talking about me. I was talking about things I could never understand.

“God, when you said to me, ‘Listen to me! I’m going to talk now! I have some questions for you, and you have to answer them’ that changed my whole perspective. I take back everything I said – all the questions I demanded answers to – and I lay myself before you acknowledging your sovereignty. I’ll be quiet, comforted that I am a small part in your infinite world.”

When Jay finished his prayer, he felt at peace. He still was in physical pain and filled with grief, but deep in his soul he knew there was joy.

During the next few days, Jay received phone calls from Eli, Bob, and Zoe. Each one apologized for the harsh way they had talked to him. Each one said they were wrong when they insisted they knew why these calamities had happened to Jay. They had asked God to forgive them. Now they asked for and received forgiveness from Jay.

During the next weeks and months Jay received a lot of assistance. Help came from individuals and from organizations including Mennonite Disaster Service and the American Red Cross. Almost every day he received calls, emails, or money from people wanting to help – church friends, employees, customers, suppliers, friends of his children, and people he had previously helped. They cleaned up and restored his house. Someone recommended a dermatologist who was able to prescribe medication that eliminated his rash. Because of his reputation as a good businessman and a trustworthy person, he was able to obtain the money he needed to rebuild his factory. Many of his employees worked at reduced pay until it was back into full production. The new ideas he incorporated into his business made it more profitable than it had been before. He received restitution for most of the money he had lost. Jay and his wife became foster parents and eventually adopted four of the children who came to live with them. Eventually their family expanded to include grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and even great-great grandchildren.

Of course, even with the restoration of Jay’s possessions and with the creation of a new family, the wounds of his earlier losses left lasting scars on him.

People often described Jay as a humble man – a man who recognized human limitations and trusted in the power and wisdom of God. When Jay shared his story with other people, he said that before the tragedy he was faithful, in part, *because* of his good fortune, but afterwards, he realized his faith wasn’t dependent on material or earthly success. In fact, the greater blessing he received after this experience was the wisdom, not the wealth.

Jay died when he was 101, old and full of days.

I’m sure you recognize Jay’s story as a contemporary version of the biblical story of Job. I don’t know any one person who has suffered all the calamities I listed. However, each of us could tell a version of the Job story. We have experienced or know someone who has experienced tragedy and loss in one form or another.

The story of Job – and the contemporary stories we could tell – bring up more questions than answers, more reflections than solutions. Let me offer four items that come to my mind as I reflect on this story.

First, after a tragedy or loss, the question “why” is common, perhaps inevitable and, ultimately, unanswerable. “Why” is the question we use to try to make sense of what happens. The person who suffers the loss hopes the answer to the question “why” will lead to some acceptance, healing, and the ability to move ahead with life.

The persons who observe the loss may subconsciously think the answer to the question “why” will offer them some protection. Why did someone die in a car accident? They were drinking. They were texting. They weren’t wearing a seat belt. Why did someone get that illness? They were overweight. They used drugs. They smoked. Why were they assaulted? They dressed provocatively. They ran with the wrong crowd. They were in the wrong neighborhood.

Sure, in these instances we might find some cause and effect. But we also know cases where the same circumstances occurred, but the outcome was different. There are other cases where none of these causes could be blamed for the bad outcome.

The question “why” or, perhaps, more specifically the question “why me – and not someone else” is often unanswerable.

Second, the story of Job causes me to reflect on how I respond to persons who are in pain. Job's friends start off right. They are physically present with their friend and grieve with him. The trouble begins when they open their mouths. Rather than being bearers of God's love and mercy, they bring judgment. Easy answers and religious platitudes aren't helpful to a person in distress. Words and actions are meaningless, at best, or harmful, at worst, if they aren't consistent with the message of peace, comfort, and presence that God offers. Of course, there is a time and place to speak words of truth and correction to a friend, but in the time of greatest distress, presence and silence are often best. When a friend is unable to hold on – to God, to hope, to life – our job is to hold on to them.

Third, we need to look at the big picture. Notice that God answers Job's questions of “why” with the question of “who.” We'll never know all that we want to know. Our knowledge will always be deficient. We can never know what is going on with God. God isn't confined to human “boxes.” God isn't obliged to play by our rules. However, by looking at the big picture – by looking at all of God's creation – we get a better sense of who God is and what our place is in the world. We are not the center of the universe. We are part of a bigger picture. We gain perspective by looking at the beauty of earth, of the seasons, of those around us, and of the church.

Fourth, in keeping with the theme of the summer, as we seek God together, Job's story teaches us the value of crying out to God. God can handle all of our “why” questions. Even when we face difficult times, we can call out to God. We can tell God when we're sad or hurting. When we do this, we are reminded of who God is, as well as how God has been and will continue to be present in our lives.

God doesn't guarantee our questions will be answered to our satisfaction. And God doesn't guarantee that all our losses will be restored twofold like they were for Job and Jay. But we do know who sees all of creation and all of reality, and who loves us. Job never loses hope in God. And God stands by Job, hearing his cry, affirming his integrity, and restoring him. God never abandoned Job, and God never abandons us, even in the midst of suffering and uncertainty. Even when it seems there is no answer to our questions. God is faithful, and God hears our cries for help in our suffering.

Job's story is a tricky one. Job had a great life. Everything was going well. He honored God. He lived with integrity. And yet hardships came his way. As you think about your own life and the lives of those around you, what things do you need to cry out to God about? Are there difficult circumstances and situations that are causing struggles or hardship? As you consider those items, how does knowing that we can bring these things to God bring peace, even if nothing else has changed? God wants to hear from you. You can lament and cry out to God.

Thanks be to God.