

## “Days Are Breath”

Job 3: 1-10; 4:1-9; 7: 11-21

This past week, in the Theology Tuesday, I asked whether or not we try to avoid situations of grief and suffering, either our own or someone else's, or are we okay with confronting and facing these types of situations in our lives. Ironically, enough, even though I asked the question of the congregation, I soon realized that by my very own actions, I was answering the question for myself because all honestly, I avoided sitting down and writing this sermon as long as I possibly could.

I knew that by writing this sermon, I would be recognizing my own struggles with dealing and facing grief and that I would be bringing to light a topic that let's face it, we would all rather avoid if we could. But unfortunately, life tells and shows us that avoiding grief, avoiding suffering is not always possible. No matter how much we would like to pretend that life is honkey dory, we know that that is not always the case.

So in good Job fashion, our text invites us to realize that no topic is off limits, no topic is too taboo for us to talk about as people of faith. Everything and anything is up for grabs, especially when it comes to talking about the many ways grief and suffering intersect with our lives. So by looking at this text, we begin to

realize we are being invited to understand that it is in the talking about our grief and suffering with God and to God where we are most reminded of and we most experience the reality of God's love and grace,

So to honor this invitation, we need to catch up on what's been going on in the story of Job.

Last week, we heard about Job's idyllic being and how his world came crashing down upon him through a few simple words. And now we find Job grieving, deep heart wrenching grieving and he is wondering where God is in all this chaos.

Not only has Job lost his children and his possessions but now we learn that Job has lost his health and well-being as well. We are told in Chapter 2 that God is holding court once more. And God turns to Satan and says, "See, after all that you did, Job never cursed me. I told you it would be this way. Job is blameless and upright, a true faithful servant.

And once again, Satan turns to God and says, "Of course, Job didn't curse you. God, you are still protecting him. Take away his health and then he will fold. Job will be at his absolute lowest and then mark my words, Job will curse you." To which God says, "Okay, give it a try. Just don't kill Job."

After this, we soon read that Job is struck down with terrible sores all over his body, sores that leaving him with itching and oozing all over his body. Real pleasant picture, right?

Well, Job's friends hear about Job's situation and each one travels from his country to be with Job in his time of need. And for seven nights, and seven days, they sit with Job in complete silence. They see how miserable Job is, they see how much Job is hurting, they see how much Job is suffering, and so they sit with him in silence.

All of this leads us up to Chapter 4, where we get part of our text today. And in this part of the text, one of Job's friends, Eliphaz, starts to speak up. Now we can tell Eliphaz has the best intentions for Job in this moment. There's no malice in his words. There's no accusatory tone. No, that all comes later. But for now, Eliphaz is trying to figure out a way to comfort his friend, to ease his pain, and to try to find some way to bring Job out of the darkness.

He simply says, "Would you mind if I speak?" He reminds Job that Job has always been faithful, that Job has always help others find their way by offering a word of comfort, and so why doesn't Job take those same words to heart now? "All Job has to do is realize and hold on to the promises of God with hope and

confidence. Things will get better. Surely, Job knows that. After all, he is a person of faith isn't he?

Now let me stop right there and say, we can tell Eliphaz has the best intentions when he offers his words. He is speaking from his own faith. He is speaking from his own experience. He is speaking from what he holds to be true. Really Eliphaz's speech is nice and I'm sure if Job was in a place where he could hear Eliphaz, then maybe Eliphaz's words might bring some comfort to Job.

But let's face it, Job is just not in that place. He is so deep down in the darkness that I would guess that he can't even comprehend the hope that Eliphaz seems to be offering. It is so far from his reach right now that Job doesn't even know what hope and confidence in the Lord looks like, let alone feels like anymore. Job just simply cannot feel them. The darkness is too strong right now.

Now I know this sounds contradictory to what I should be preaching and telling everyone today. But sometimes all we can do and all we need to do in that moment is mourn. Which thankfully leaves us in good company with so many other people and texts found in the Bible. Our sacred Scriptures are full of texts that express grief, express hopeless, express the need to just pull the covers over our heads and ignore that this day even existed.

Job's words in our text today are heart felt. And through his words, we as people of faith have been given permission to grieve in the face of suffering and loss, something we don't usually have. We don't usually have permission to grieve. Usually everyone expects us to put on a good face and pretend that nothing is wrong in our lives. Usually we feel like we have to put forward a brave front because we know no one likes to talk about grief. No one likes to talk about suffering. We would all rather pretend they don't exist.

But Job's words change all that. And they let us know one of the greatest gifts that we have been given as people of faith is that we can bring our deepest pain, our deepest hurt, our deepest fear, and yes, our deepest anger to God and God will hear.

That being said, I was finally able to name why Eliphaz's well intentioned speech has bothered me so much this week. Yes, I know that as people of faith, we do have hope in the Lord for the future. Yes, I know that as people of faith, we do have confidence that death will not have the last word but sometimes, in the face of grief, in the face of suffering, all that hope, all that confidence fades away and we just simply cannot, cannot hear those words of comfort and peace. Sometimes, all that is left is darkness and no amount of well-intentioned words can bring light to that darkness. Sometimes we just need to mourn.

All week, I have been bothered by Eliphaz's words, not because there is anything really wrong with them. I'm sure I've said these words to others in times of grief and suffering as well. But there was something that bothered me about them. And the more I sat with them this past week, the more I realized that it wasn't necessarily the words that bothered me but the sentiment behind the words that did.

Let me explain: Sometimes when faced with grief, when faced with suffering, we just cannot find hope. And sometimes that feeling only gets worse when we hear well intentioned words of comfort and peace. We start thinking that there must be something wrong with us. We are people of faith. Why can't we just buck up buttercup and move on? We think we should be able to move quickly from grief to hope because we know what we believe. We know what we hold true, so why can't we just pull ourselves out of the darkness?

Well, here's why: Grief doesn't work that way. There is no time limit to grief. It can take weeks. It can take months. It can take years. Grief is a process and there are no rewards for finishing up before we are ready.

So what bothered me about the sentiment behind Eliphaz's words is that it seems like Job's grieving disrupted Eliphaz's "normal" word. Job's grieving was more than Eliphaz could handle. He wanted Job to go from hurt to hope in just

seven days. He wanted Job to go from grief and despair to joy in such a short time that I wondered what was really behind Eliphaz's words. What's the rush? Was it Job's grief that was causing it or something else?

As I've reflected on these texts this past week, there is only one reason I could come up with as to why we like Eliphaz are so uncomfortable around grief and suffering. Sure, I could say we are uncomfortable with grief and suffering because it is not the natural order of things. But let's face it, life tells us differently. Every day, grief and suffering fills our world in unnatural ways.

So the only reason that I could come up with as to why we are uncomfortable with grief and suffering when we come face to face with it and why we rush ourselves and others to go from grief to hope so quickly is that grief and suffering remind us of the fragility of life. I'll say that again: Grief and suffering remind us that we are fragile beings. They remind us that we are not in control. They remind us that we are not invincible.

When we come face to face with grief, when we come face to face with suffering, we are reminded that we are fragile beings and that scares the bejesus out of us.

In those moments when grief and suffering knock us to our knees, All of a sudden, we have to admit that our days are like breath, here one moment, gone the

next. And let's face it, no one wants to dwell on that. No one likes coming to terms with his or her own mortality. We would much rather think about life than think about how fragile we are.

Especially since everything in our culture, our society tells us that what is important, what makes us happy always is the search for health and youth. There are products we can use that promise, just by using them, we will feel and look younger and better. There are things we can do that help us buy into the illusion that we can buy a little bit more time here on earth or at least that is what we tell ourselves. Everything about the culture, about the society we live in tells us that to be happy we have to maintain our health and our image of youth and life.

But when grief and suffering come along, all those supposed images of health, of control, of invincibility are shattered and we come face to face with the shocking reality that we are not in control, that we are fragile beings, that our days are just a breath, here one day and gone the next.

Now that I have fully and completely depressed everyone, including myself, I guess it is only fitting that I bring us some good news as well.

Well, here it is: As I've said, when we come face to face with grief, when we come face to face with suffering, either our own or someone else's, when we come face to face with the reality that our days are a breath, our illusions are shattered.

And in that moment, true transformation can begin. In that moment we can begin to see what is real. In that moment, we can begin to name what nourishes our spirit and can begin the process of healing.

And during that process, we begin to see how limiting our language really is. Sometimes, it is okay to admit that traditional language for grief and suffering has failed us. Sometimes, it is okay to admit that traditional language of hope and comfort has failed us. Sometimes, it is okay to admit that traditional language of God has failed us. But it is not okay to stop the conversation. In the darkness, when all else has failed, we must find new ways to communicate with our God and with one another. We must find ways to continue the conversation.

And Job does just that. He tells God that he is not going to be quiet anymore. He tells God that he is not going to set back and take it. When all else failed Job, he starts really talking with God, not just about God as if God was some being far away. No, when all else fails, Job begins talking with his God, begins talking to his God, reminding himself that God is right here with him.

What I love about this text is that we notice it is not God telling Job that Job has to move on and get on with his grief. It is not God who tells Job to trust and have confidence. That's what Job's friends are saying, not God.

I like to think that when Job finally starts talking with God, starts talking to God, that God has been there all along, sitting there, listening to Job pour his heart out. God has been there all along, sitting there listening to Job yell at God, point fingers at God. I like to think that God has been there all along, sitting there, listening to Job share his deepest hurts, his deepest angers, his deepest pains, listening to them all, thankful that Job was at least still speaking with God.

Now, I know that eventually, we do come to the point in our story, when God will speak but for now, God knows what Job needs most is someone to just sit and listen. God knows what Job needs most right now is the chance to grieve. I like to think that God knows what Job needs most right now is just someone who will sit and listen, not try to fix, not try to make it better, but someone to just sit and listen.

Because I think what God wants more than anything for Job and for us as people of faith, is for us to know that when grief and suffering intersect with our life, we are not alone and the conversation is far from over.

May we always find the strength to bring our deepest hurts, our deepest pains, our deepest fears and yes even our deepest angers to God because we know that God hears them and the conversation is far from over. Amen.