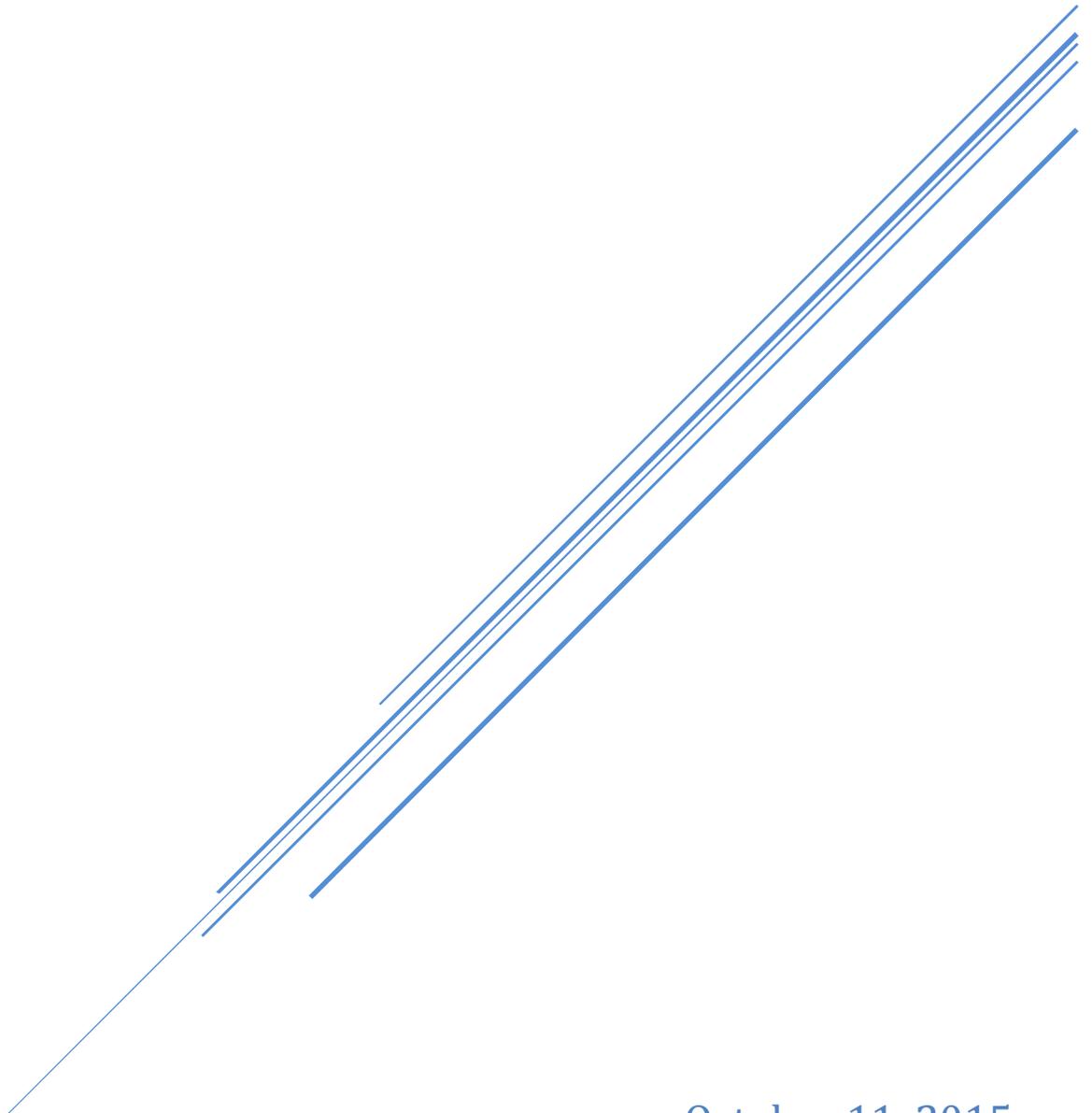


WHERE IS GOD?

Job 23:1-9, 16-17



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I have to admit I never wanted to preach on the book of Job! The God of Job doesn't seem a very likeable God. I mean, where's the grace? And I just kind of end up feeling sorry for Job, you know?

But I was intrigued that the people who put together the lectionary chose this piece as the one passage of the loooong dialogue between Job and his friends that they've suggested preachers preach about. Why not the extended lament of chapter 9, where Job accuses his friends of being callous, attacks God as also being callous, then nothing less than evil, and concludes with the vain hope that some kind of umpire might show up to make a genuine discussion with God possible?

Or why not Eliphaz' long and tedious speech in Chapter 15 against Job's "windy knowledge" and "unprofitable talk", which is then answered by Job's famous and equally long response in Chapter 16, that Eliphaz and his two friends are only "miserable comforters"? In that judgment, by the way, Job is not too far off.

In fact, chapters 3-21 are full of clever word play and heated arguments (all in verse, by the way -- they're all poetry!) -- arguments about one primary assertion: that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked.

Job and his friends share that belief, but they don't agree when it comes to the application of its truth. The friends tell Job again and again that he's on the ash heap because he's a foul sinner, so God's unbreakable rules are being followed to the letter. Job on the other hand, isn't having any of it. He hasn't sinned so brazenly that he would deserve THIS kind of punishment. Listen:

There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants; so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east. His sons used to go and hold feasts in one another's houses in turn; and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. And when the feast days had run their course, Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, "It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts." This is what Job always did. – Job 1:1-5

...and that's our introduction to Job of Uz.

But Job has been taught that God does reward and punish as his friends claim, which is supported by the way he drags all those animal sacrifices into the worshiping place, just in case one of his children has ever even silently 'cursed God' (Jb 1:5)

Job believes he should still be receiving the rich blessings of God – not the back of God's divine hand. But in spite of his embedded theology, and despite what his friends say, God seems to be beating up on Job for no apparent reason – like a bully or an abuser -- and that is the struggle of the whole book – all 42 chapters! So, if God doesn't mechanically reward the good and punish the sinner, then just what is God doing?

We can look at chapter 23 as a kind of summary of the dialogue that has been raging all through the preceding twenty chapters. Job's friend Eliphaz, in a final attempt to get Job to "see reason" and admit his obvious guilt so he can return to the fold of the 'true believers' pleads, "Agree with God and gain peace; by this good will come to you. Take Torah from God's mouth, and put God's words in your heart."

It's the desperate cry of the enthusiastic preacher who has exhausted every other argument, so he urges the doubting and reluctant sinner to simply agree. Accept what the tradition has always taught. Stop fighting! Be at peace! Receive the teaching and come back into the fold of God.

And can't you just hear poor Job, "But your tradition doesn't jive with my own experience! And I haven't done anything!"

You see, because of Job's own experience, he's come to believe that the old God he thought he knew and loved has disappeared – or worse -- *never existed at all*. Job's continued attempts to talk to this God have been refused or ignored under an avalanche of disaster, loss, and humiliation. Meanwhile, these friends who, instead of comforting him like they promised, have instead ganged up on Job, using him for religious target practice, and bullying him, just like God has apparently been doing (Jb 16:7-14).

So instead of giving in, instead of joining Eliphaz on his knees at the altar of repentance, Job says, "Also today, my complaint is rebellious; my power is burdened with my groaning." Job's not buying Eliphaz' demand for repentance and return; his anger has only increased, while his strength has been drained by his continuous suffering.

And yet, Job's one desire is simply to talk to this baffling deity. "I would lay my case before him," Job says, "and fill my mouth with arguments. I would learn what he would answer me, and understand what he would say...." Job completely rejects Eliphaz' call to repentance (I think I'm starting to like this Job!). Job will not repent, because he hasn't done anything! Instead, he wants to meet God with a well-argued case, and in return to get a reasonable response.

Earlier, in chapter 9, Job delivers a long speech in which he says that God wouldn't listen anyway – Why would God even have to –

"Who has resisted him, and succeeded? -- he who removes mountains, and they do not know it, when he overturns them in his anger; who shakes the earth out of its place, and its pillars tremble... God will not turn back his anger; ...How then can I answer him, choosing my words with him?" (Jb 9:4-5, 13-14).

But here, Job imagines that God would not "...contend with me in the greatness of his power..." but would actually listen to his pleas for justice. "...an upright person could reason with him," says Job, "and I should be acquitted forever by my judge" (Jv 23:7).

Far from repentance, Job wants an acquittal from God. Job is convinced that God made a mistake, and on hearing the facts of the case, God will offer the sweet words of pardon – not because of Job's admission of guilt, but because God will see that Job has always been innocent of any crime or sin.

Unfortunately, Job's hopeful projection quickly segues into a terrible reality: Job can't find God anywhere! "If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him." Job's hopeful fantasies about a reasonable courtroom acquittal are just that – fantasies.

But the fact remains: God is lost – or God has forgotten all about Job. Or even worse – God has become the enemy. You can hear the despair in Job's final words of our passage: "...the Almighty has terrified me; If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!" I know that wish. Do you?

This longing – this desperate need for – if not an answer to the whys of suffering – then at least some sense that God is at least nearby, concerned, interested, something – is sure to resonate with anybody who hears it. I had a youth recently – not from around here -- tell me almost those exact words: "I just wish I could disappear." I've felt it myself. As a teenager, I spent many hours

planning how to fake my own death. Nobody knows that. I just wanted to disappear.

There are real people out there -- and in here -- people just like Job: abused, not by a person necessarily, but by life itself -- lonely people who find precious little hope or solace in life. And we're forced to wonder: Can the presence or purpose of God be understood at all?

When the preacher tells us to 'accept what you've been told, be at peace' the way Eliphaz told Job, and we're not convinced and we're not consoled -- not comforted -- then what?

Statistics show that many people who have been taught certain things about God have decided that those teachings just don't do it for them anymore. The fastest group of believers in the United States are claiming no religious affiliation at all. In the past 20 years, their numbers have increased exponentially until now, fully 15% of those polled join with Job -- "I walk forward -- but no God!"

But Job does not join them. Reading forward to the end of the dialogue in chapter 31, Job is still demanding an audience with the Almighty. And, after his friends yammer on for another seven chapters, he gets one. Even though his friend Elihu insists that God would never talk to a sinner like you -- I mean, like Job.

God speaks to Job and not to his preach-y friends, or his wife, who clearly have all the truth about God there is to know, or so they think. God answers Job -- Job, the loudmouthed, blasphemous one -- the squeaky wheel who refuses to accept certain beliefs simply because other people believe them.

Maybe preaching a sermon about Job isn't so bad after all. Maybe there is a lesson we can learn from this guy. We still have to search for God -- in our own way -- and not rely on embedded theologies and long-hallowed traditions, loudly broadcast. We can take them into account, of course, there's some really good stuff there, but it might just be that God would rather have an unpleasant and persistent demander than a comfortably pious and self-assured, well-spoken traditional preacher any day. Maybe...

Amen.