

Proper 23B: Job 23.1-9,16-17

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We don't get many L.L. Bean catalogues in the mail anymore. The last time one arrived, it brought to mind the days when we seemed to get 6 or 7 a week. What hasn't changed over the years is the somewhat narrow display of diversity on their pages. There are people of different ethnicities, people of different skin color and different hair texture. But everyone is wearing L.L. Bean clothing. And their clothing is all roughly the same size.

And not only is everyone wearing L.L. Bean clothing, pitching L.L. Bean tents, and relaxing next to L.L. Bean canoes, they are also all wearing the same pleasant smile. The smile of a well-adjusted, middle-class American. An unpretentious lover of the outdoors who is as comfortable in his own skin as he is in his chinos, flannel shirt, and sensible shoes.

The word "diversity" conjures up an L.L. Bean catalogue for me. It can suggest the mildest and most inoffensive sorts of differences among people whose children are all perfectly content playing with a few seashells on their manicured lawns, and whose Golden Retrievers never shed or soil the carpets.

So, one might wonder, what would happen to us if on page 47 of the next L.L. Bean catalogue, rather than a pleasantly proportioned woman in plaid pajamas and a pair of Wicked Good slippers, we found an ancient Hebrew named Job, sitting in ashes, finding a little relief from his suffering by scraping his arms with a shard from a broken pot?

It would be a little strange, wouldn't it? There's no sackcloth in the fall collection this year. But wouldn't the diversity of the catalogue go a little deeper if he were there?

Job seems almost as out of place here in church, don't you think? And it's not just his frightening appearance that's unsettling, which was described in uncomfortable detail in last week's reading. It's Job's faith that doesn't seem like anything we were taught to aspire to in Sunday School: "If I go forward, [God] is not there" Job moans, "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."

In the story of Job, a story explicitly told as the ultimate example of unshakable faith, one scene is of our hero saying, "I'm miserable, and I can't see God anywhere."

At the very least we learn that the Bible's no L.L. Bean catalogue. Not only are Job's clothes filthy and unsightly. His faith is in shreds and ashes as well.

So, why in the world might Christians and Jews tell a story like this to one generation after another? I realize we're not finished with it yet. But we're told over and over again throughout the book that Job was faithful through it all. So, when we drop into a scene from that life, we presumably get a glimpse of what faithfulness can look like at times. And apparently one picture of faithfulness is of a suffering man whose world seems to have been emptied of God.

This may not seem like a terribly helpful image. Christians are supposed to be telling good news, right? But maybe one of the things that the story of Job is meant to do for us is to diversify our religious friends. Maybe we need to hear from people out at the edges of human experience for our faith to be meaningful.

The word 'religion' is built on the same root as 'ligament.' It's about binding things together. Perhaps what we're meant to do at a very basic level when we read a story like Job's in the Bible, is to let ourselves be bound to Job. We simply call Job one of us and believe that in spite of all its bizarre details, his life might be relevant to ours. Or at least that his life might do something to ours. We listen to him. We open ourselves to the possibility, even, that Job is what a faithful Christian life might look like sometimes. And see what happens.

Job's friends usually aren't remembered too kindly in this story. They're the ones who supposedly give him all the wrong advice, insisting that there must have been some grave sin Job was forgetting that caused all this hardship.

But listen to how these three friends first appear in the book: "When they saw [Job] from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. They sat with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great."

When Job's three friends saw him, they didn't start to explain anything. They didn't draw a lesson from anything. They didn't say anything at all until they had wept and sat in silence with their friend for seven days. Might we be called to make the same response too at times? To simply step out of our L.L. Bean (or whatever catalogue you inhabit) life and sit with the painful story of another person, believing that our religion may not work on us most profoundly by giving us rules to live by as it does by binding our lives to other lives?

I had a friend back in Arkansas who looked a lot like Job, at least as I imagine him. His name was Darryl. His clothes were soiled and torn. He would park his bike in the narthex of the church several times a week and come in to pray.

I know a few Darryl's here in Memphis, too, of course. But since we've been at Calvary for seven years I feel like some kind of statute of limitations is up, which allows me to tell you that Darryl also used to walk into my office several times a week and say, "Hey preacher. Is Secretary here? I want her to put this \$3 in. This is my church, you know?"

Well, "Secretary," whose name was Carol Lou, and I used to resist Darryl's gifts. Frankly, I wanted him to buy himself a pair of pants, or at least a belt to keep them from falling off his hips as they did from time to time. But he wouldn't give in. So, we let him give the church his money. Carol Lou would write his name on an envelope and seal it up, which made Darryl happy. I should add that his gifts amounted to several hundred dollars in a year.

Darryl's experiences in this life had been pretty different from mine. I never knew many particulars of his past. But I could see that he looked different. He smelled different. He thought differently. He spent his days differently. He prayed differently. He spent his money differently. And it was his sheer persistence that kept me from ignoring him, wondering what his life could possibly have to do with mine, keeping a safer distance.

"This is my church," Darryl would say. And he was right. And I was changed a little every time he told me that. Every time he walked in with three more dollars to give away, I was changed. And so was my unspoken definition of church.

Christian faith demands that we care for the poor and the downtrodden, and I have no doubt that folks back in Little Rock are still doing what they can for Darryl. But the story of Job draws us towards an even deeper truth about the ways of God in this world. Because Job is not presented as someone who needs our help. He's held up as a great exemplar of the faith, a

man of God we're told. All we're really asked to do is let Job walk in on our lives. Strange old Job, his body covered with ashes and sores, wondering if God is anywhere to be found in this world. Are we willing to let our religion bind our lives up with his? Are we willing to let this strange, brooding Hebrew stride into our midst and say, "This is my church"?

You see, Jesus taught that the economy of grace is different. "Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first," we just heard him say. Things are upside down and backwards in the economy of grace. We think the way things work is that those who have something give to those who need something in this world. Then we meet Job, and everything turns around. We meet Job and see, not that suffering has meaning or that God is its cause. Human suffering remains an inexplicable mystery to the end. What we do see is that no life is beyond the reach of God's belovedness. And there is no telling what kind of life God might use to change yours.

We get glimpses of this truth all the time, in all kinds of places. Like once when a client leaving a counseling group Ardelle used to lead suddenly looked at her and said, "You're one of us, aren't you?" And she saw he was right. And they were both a little changed. Grace comes to us this way all the time, doesn't it? If only we're given eyes to see.

So, what if Christians came to be known not as those people who think they know how to fix everybody else in the world, but as people who believe that we are changed as our lives are bound together with all kinds of other lives. Maybe even the lives of people who believe that faithfulness can look like hopelessness, that wealth can look like poverty, that the fullest life can look empty.

For if we really believed such things, imagine what sorts of lives we might let ours be bound up with. Imagine how we might look at one another and at the rest of our world. Imagine how we might be changed a little, right here at Calvary, by every child of God who simply says, in one way or another, "This is my church too, you know. This is my church."