

**“THANK GOD FOR JOB”**  
**Psalm 8: Job 38: 1 - 7, 38 - 41**  
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So, do you think it worked for Job? Does it work for you? In the last month in worship, the lectionary has been moving through the book of Job. For those of you who haven't ever read through the whole book, or have missed some of the last month of the lectionary, I'll give you a brief recapitulation. Job, we are shown, is a good man who through no fault of his own suffers greatly, and wants to understand the nature of his suffering. Job has several so - called friends who come to see him, supposedly to comfort him; and they do that by drawing a simple equation that life is fair, and if Job is suffering, then it must be Job's fault. The friends' answers don't work for Job; he is an honest man and refuses to give in to his friends' pressure to just accept that this is all his fault. In his despair, Job looks for God, but God seems absent. In anger, Job challenges God, demands that God answer him. And finally, here at the end, in two long speeches, part of which Kathie just read for us, God speaks. God gives Job God's answer.

These chapters of God's answer, chapters 38 - 41 of the book of Job, they are some of the most powerful, imageful, beautiful passages of the Hebrew Bible. Pick up your pew Bible if you want, and take a look. This section of Job is, at one level, a prose poem of praise to the creative imagination of the universe. It is a portrait of the Creator of All That Is at work and play: determining the foundations of the earth, entering the storehouses of the snow, contemplating the design of a horse, setting the months and hours, taming the great Leviathan - the legendary sea monster that personifies chaos. These images show us a God, brilliant and mighty. God, infinitely creative and managing every detail of creation. God, so far beyond human understanding that we are left only to stand in God's presence in awe and mystery. "If you can do what I do," God answers Job. "If you like me can do all this, well then, then I can answer your questions about the nature of suffering, and the hardness of life." And, of course, Job cannot, just as we cannot. Here ends God's answer. Done. God is God, and we are human, and because of the gulf that separates the Creator from the created, we simply cannot understand God's ways. Well, . . .what? Does that work for you? Is that enough for us? If that's truly all we can receive from God in the way of an answer, how do we make it enough?

To address that question, I want to go backwards for a minute, and talk a little about the importance of the book of Job as a whole. Putting aside for a moment the big question left unanswered, Job teaches us much we need to hear. When we are lost, when we are grieving, when we are empty or overwhelmed: Job gives us permission to be all those things as faithful people, and to offer them up to God as the authentic prayer of our hearts. That is a significant gift. I think that most of us still feel that we should come before God only when we're well - dressed—literally and emotionally—and communicate with God only in respectful, measured, beautiful words. To affirm that our anger, our rage, our most un - tidied up, raw, painful emotion - all of that—it's ok, it's safe for us to offer that to God, that's important. To understand the unmeasured cry of the heart as prayer: most of us will need to hear that at some point or points in our lives.

Also, Job strengthens us to withstand the well - meaning obnoxious statements of the “friends” of our age: you know who those people are. They are the ones who tell us that tragedy is God’s will, or that we get what we deserve, or that we never get more than we can bear. None of that is true. But sometimes when people say those things to you as if they were indisputable articles of faith, you start to wonder. Read Job, and don’t listen to those who would comfort with easy platitudes.

Finally, Job reminds us powerfully, beautifully that we are not God, that we cannot comprehend the mind of God, that we are qualitatively, not just quantitatively, different from the Ruler of Creation - and we need to know that. So often in our minds, we, without realizing it, anthropomorphize God as just a really good and smart version of ourselves. You know what I mean by that. And as comforting as such a God might sometimes seem, that’s just not who God is - and the book of Job makes that abundantly clear. So all these are qualities of the book of Job that inform our faith, and help us move forward when life is difficult. What Job refuses to do is give us answers to the question “why?” Why does this one live and this one die? Why this disappointment, this pain, this disability? Why the horror of random violence or devastating acts of nature? Why does one person have to live with the worst possible consequences of risky behavior while another gets off unscathed? We know the questions. But how do we live without the answers?

I’ve been thinking about that a lot this week, and I find myself returning over and over again to the response of the Amish community to the shooting of those little girls in Pennsylvania a few weeks ago. Here we have families and a faith community that suffered a terrible random tragedy, and the community has responded as the faithful people of God; they have deeply lived their Christian faith. At least publicly, they have not asked the question: Why us? Instead, they have chosen to actively forgive, to turn aside from violence and retaliation. They attended the funeral of the shooter, extended themselves to support his family. I have been moved and impressed by their behavior and by their public statements. They remind me of Job, who even in his worst pain and anger refused to curse God or move away from his faith.

And what I see when I look at those Amish families or at Job is that faith at its best is a discipline. Faith is not, at its deepest level, about feelings or reason; it is a soul - chosen commitment to a way of being in the world: I believe in God, or I am a Christian, and therefore I will move through my life, touch the world in these ways that embody, that give substance to my belief. And I know that discipline is not one of our favorite words or concepts in the liberal church tradition, but that is our loss. Because when times are difficult: when we are in pain, when we are grieving, when we seek God and can’t find God - in those times, only a disciplined, practiced, well - exercised faith will see us through.

I think the exercise metaphor may be a helpful one. Most of us can walk around the block with little trouble, and if we’re pressed to do that on the spur of the moment, it’s no big deal. When life gives us challenges the size of a walk around the block, it doesn’t matter that we’ve been disorganized and inattentive to developing our faith. It doesn’t matter that we haven’t developed a prayer life or become articulate about the connection between what we believe and how we want to live in the world. But what happened in Pennsylvania: those people are being asked to run

a marathon; and they can do it, because living deliberately, intentionally exercising the choices of faith is something they consciously practice every day. If you were to experience such tragedy, how helpful would your faith be to you? Have you trained yourself theologically for a long - distance cross - country run?

We don't have to live the counter - cultural life of the Amish to have a disciplined faith. I remember several years ago when Earnie Lidell died. Many of you here remember Earnie. He was a retired UCC pastor. He and his wife, Miriam, were members of this congregation, and Earnie died suddenly of a heart attack one night. I spent the night with Miriam so she wouldn't be alone until her daughters came to be with her; and when I woke up in the morning, she was sitting in her chair doing her morning Bible study and devotions, something she had done every morning of her adult life. That discipline, that commitment took her through her husband's sudden death sad, grieving, but not having to beat against the question "why?" to which we have no answer. Faith allowed her to run her race; it built a bridge for her for safe passage across that deep chasm of "why?" When I find myself growing lax in my own private spiritual life, I think of Miriam, and I am encouraged to pay attention, to be disciplined.

All of life is uncertain, and sometimes it is just plain hard. I give thanks for our Christian writings, especially the book of Job, because they meet us in our darkness without either trivializing human pain or leaving us alone in it. There are no simple answers to suffering, no answers that God can give us that we can understand. It's not that God is being coy or difficult; it's just something we cannot know. So in the absence of knowing, the alternative is for us to study, to pray, to reflect: to exercise the faith that is in us constantly, in a disciplined manner, so that when we meet challenges, our faith will have the strength and substance to carry us through even in the absence of answers. It's not what we want, but, we are promised, it will be enough. Amen.