

THE HEART OF DARKNESS

Job 23: 17: "I am hemmed in by darkness, and thick darkness covers my face" (Revised Standard Version)

The Book of Job raises some very difficult questions for us because it touches us where life can hurt us most. The question that it poses for us is not merely why is there suffering, but why do the good suffer. I would like to ponder this question this morning.

I find this translation from the Revised Standard Version helpful in making clear the problem that Job faces in this wonderful and profound story. It helps us see our problem in trying to understand the central concern of the book of Job.

The puzzle is: why does God allow all this pain and suffering to happen to this good, honest and upright man. What throws Job into despair is that his life of good deeds and upright living has been repaid with disease, suffering, poverty and destitution. Surely, Job was right to ask for an explanation of such terrible treatment by the fates, or whatever else that rules the universe. Shouldn't he expect far better treatment from his God, the righteous one? We stand firmly with Job on his cry of frustration with God.

This upright man faces pain and destitution with no answer from what appears to be nothing more than a blind and unfeeling universe. What is there that he can appeal to since all that life seemed to contain was an empty, dark universe with no justice, and no concern for the good man.

The question that Job seems to be asking is whether the darkness hemming him in was nothing more than the darkness of a neutral universe, with nothing of moral goodness, no God of justice, only the nothingness of endless space and time. Was this the darkness of night and desolation of silent terror that encompassed him - the darkness of Nothingness?

Doesn't that sound familiar? There are times when everything seems to be against us and the world is a blank and empty force offering no appeal against the turmoil, pain and anguish of life. At such a time the only conclusion is that the world is an empty place, a void beyond which there is absolutely nothing whatsoever. It would seem that there is nothing beyond a short span of an empty life with no justice and no God. This is the way in which some ancient Greeks thought of their lives. The Stoics and the Epicureans saw life as an empty vessel into which we poured what small amount of meaning that we could. For them the Universe was an empty neutral force that continued without our permission and without taking any notice of our daily cares. Whatever good that there could be in this world is what we humans created and there is nothing else.

The Stoics accepted life as it came, with little joy and little sadness. Since there is nothing to get excited about, why get excited. They measured goodness only to the extent to which they could live a life of self-control in the midst of whatever happens. The Epicureans took a somewhat different view, for them it was to leap into a life of ecstasy finding pleasure in whatever they could while they lived.

Job, on the other hand, does not simply accept the despairing tragedies of his life, he feels threatened by the darkness that surrounds him and finds in the darkness of his suffering a force that he cannot comprehend. His sense of despair lies beyond the pain and the disease and poverty in which he finds himself. One is led to ask whether he thinks that he deserves more than this and this is why he cries out in utter frustration. If it were only the pain, then the darkness that threatens would be a happy release from the suffering. If it were only the poverty, Job could have simply railed against the injustice of fate.

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The darkness that Job finds hemming him in is a more terrifying darkness than that of a neutral, unthinking Universe, a world without meaning and it is this darkness that terrifies him. This darkness suggests not the presence of nothing, but rather the **absence** of something. What terrifies Job is the very absence of the God he believes in. The darkness that hems him in, that surrounds him, is the very emptiness of what he thought was God's Universe.

Let us look at this from Job's point of view. Here he was living a just and upright life, a kindly soul, never doing anything bad against anyone, always helping his neighbor, treating his wife with fairness and love, never cheating in the marketplace and paying his taxes full and on time, observing all the religious duties. And now out of the blue comes calamity, ill health, pain and suffering, loss of business, the poverty line near the town dump. "God," he cries out, "where is your sense of justice?" Where, we might ask, is there goodness in this world if such misfortune can happen to a good man like Job?

If Job continues to believe in God he must still believe that God is absent from his life. For Job this awareness of absence is more terrifying than believing in the non-existence of God. Such an absence is terrifying because it suggests a willful act on the part of God.

God is not here, he has departed for another country. The wilderness in which Job dwells is the wilderness of God's making because God must have deserted him. This is what Job must have thought.

Job thought that God had deserted him. But why would he think that? Surely, he would only think that if he thought that his goodness gave him a claim upon God. Being good he deserved God's attention. What this passage suggests is that Job encounters the darkness of despair and the emptiness of a world of God's absence because in thinking that it is his goodness that gave him a claim upon God he has shut himself off from God. What Job has encountered in the blackness of his despair is the very reality of God in His very absence. This is the enigma of life. It has been the source of so much of our literature. Tolstoy, for example, in his searing short story "The Death of Ivan Illych" writes of a Judge, who has lived a very ordinary life, somewhat dissociated from his family life, yet faithful to his wife and children, who succumbs to an illness that leads to his death. As he faces the end of his life he becomes more and more concerned about the many things that he has done that have been hurtful to others and he becomes more and more agitated. All that Tolstoy can say of his end is that he accepted death with equanimity as a release. There is nothing to be learned from this nothingness. This is not Job's conundrum. For Job there is something that presses upon him when God is not there.

There is something very paradoxical in all of this for how can we learn of the presence of God in his absence? Unlike Ivan Illych who simply accepts the nothingness of the end, Job learns something of himself in this encounter with the impenetrable darkness. Job had demanded God's presence because he had lived a good and blameless life. I suspect that we would all agree with him that this is only fair. We want something in return for all our efforts in being good and faithful servants. But there is something implied in this expectation that God should reward us for being good.

When Job demands that God rewards his good deeds with his presence it tells us that for him doing good has no purpose beyond being a means to gaining a reward. Doing good and being good, therefore, is a means of establishing a power over God. This makes God a creature of my demands and a willing partner to my hope for power. We are rather like the little child who obeys Mummy only because there is some candy in the offing. Where is the respect for Mummy when response is conditioned upon receipt of a reward? Doing good and being good becomes a means of conditioning god to our own will. Our demands negate God's power.

Just as the child obeys his mother only because there is a treat at the end of the deed, so we look to God only because we hope for some reward. God is made little more than a candy machine dispensing goodies after we have put in our coin of goodness into the slot of life. What Job discovered in the darkness of his suffering was that there was no way in which he could manipulate God. The awareness of God's absence was awareness that there is no power on earth that can manipulate God. The coin in the candy machine will drop down into a depth of darkness which tells us that God does not play this game.

The darkness of Job's suffering also tells us something else that is important about our world. Job seems to have turned his sense of goodness into a god. There are those who take pride in their goodness and do all the good deeds only because they can bask in some reflected glory. Good becomes a means to ingratiate oneself upon the world. The Greek myth of the young man named Narcissus tells the story of the youth so full of beauty who went to the lake and in looking down at his reflection fell so in love with his image that he could leave the poolside with its reflection of his image. So he died of hunger looking at himself reflected in the waters of the pool. The good man who falls in love with his own goodness is like Narcissus for he has fallen in love with himself. What follows is the darkness of an empty vision.

To fall in love with one's own sense of importance is to fall in love with an empty vision. The darkness that envelops Narcissus is the darkness of a self imposed death. What must follow such a sense of self-regard is the death of the soul. The World is not itself a "good" nor is it the means of our finding ourselves. The real suffering that Job encounters here is the suffering of discovering God's absence from Job's own acts of goodness, acts that were done in the fullness of a self-regarding heart.

Job was a good man, he had done nothing to deserve his suffering, but what he discovered was that he had lost his way in his very goodness. Being a god in his being **good** was his downfall. In the limiting darkness that hemmed him in he had become aware that he was not God. His goodness had deceived him into thinking that he had no need for God, for HE was God.

Does goodness deceive us then? God is absent from the life which has been lived in the hope of a reward and which has been lived in the hope of self glory. Bu the darkness also suggests that God's presence in that absence. Job begins to discover that there is in the darkness a clue about himself.

The darkness that represented the chaos that existed before creation tells us not of a world without God, but of the presence of God who has not yet given order to the world. In the magnificent poetry of the story Job hears the voice of God out of the whirlwind: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?"

You do not find God as a part of the world. The darkness during the day that surrounded the last moments of Jesus' life points to the profoundest meaning of Job's darkness. In the cry upon the cross never has the absence of God been so deeply sensed and understood. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" But Jesus commits his spirit to God immediately after that cry. What do we learn from that? It is the beyondness of God that we find hard to comprehend. God is beyond goodness, beyond the deeds which we do in obedience to rules and vows of obedience, beyond our religious rites and duties. He is beyond the sun and the moon and the created artifacts of earth, beyond the hopes and dreams and fears of our own lives, beyond even the tasks that consumed the disciples.

What Job teaches us is that there in the dark experiences of life we can begin to understand that we cannot keep God captive. It is in the darkness of our own lack of understanding, the darkness of our own chaotic life, that we begin to be aware of our being beyond our depth. Yet it is in these dark moments of our despair of ever knowing God in the sometimes bitter fragments of our lives that the moment of truth dawns upon us. At the moment we are grasped by the darkness that hems us in, the darkness that threatens sometimes to overtake us, we encounter the limits of our own being, our own understanding, and the very limits that speak to us of God. “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?”

While Job at first only cried out in painful lament, he finally took that darkness seriously. His first reaction was to lament for all the things he had lost, those things on which he had pinned his hopes and dreams. It was a lamentation for a life gone to ruin, a lamentation for a lifetime of lost causes. But when he listened, when he took seriously the silence of the dark night Job heard the still small voice of God. The power of God spoke in the darkness of his encounter with the limitations of his life. So God speaks to us in the darkness of our limitations. God speaks to us of his being beyond the world, beyond us, beyond our best causes and we need to accept that moment of revelation. Unlike Narcissus we must not be taken in by our love of the image of beauty, goodness or life’s pleasant offerings.

R. S. Thomas, the Anglo-welsh poet, speaks of the language of silence, the silence that comes to us in those profound moments of the puzzlements of life, the language of silence that Job heard in the darkness that hemmed him in. In the silence of his very despair he found his answer.

And so I listen
instead and hear the language
of silence, the sentence
without an end. Is it I, then
who am being addressed?

The darkness Thomas speaks about in this poem is the darkness of suffering, the darkness of the anguish and turmoil of life that bring us to cry out when there seems to be no response to our need. But it is in that very silence we find ourselves being addressed by God. In that moment when we are addressed by silence we look for the first time to the “beyond” that enters our time and speaks to us in the silence itself.

God does not speak in empty platitudes, but rather he speaks to us in the very depth of our most poignant moments, those moments of deepest hurt. In the words of R.S. Thomas: it is in the darkness that we “stare over into the eternal silence that is the repose of God.”

Sermon preached by John S. Morris
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