***The Loneliness of Job and our Corporate Loneliness***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on August 17, 2025*

*based on Job 1:1, 2:1-10*

Last week I delivered a sermon titled, “Jesus’s Loneliness And Our Own.” That evening, last Sunday, I was thinking about how to carry this subject further. I mean, loneliness is a huge thing these days and for lots of reasons. So, I began thinking of other portraits of loneliness in the Bible.

There are lots of them, but I quickly thought of Job. It occurred to me that he might be the gold standard for isolation. I Googled the words, “Job’s loneliness” and this quote from the novelist, Thomas Wolfe came right up:

“The most tragic, sublime and beautiful expression of loneliness which I have ever read is the Book of Job.” (*The Anatomy of Loneliness,* Teal Swan).

The image of Job one gleans from the Bible is of a man in a tattered (but expensive robe) sitting alone on a heap of ashes, scratching his sore-riddled torso with a broken shard of pottery. It’s striking.

Job, expresses his own loneliness in these words:

*My family and close friends have failed me;
the guests in my house have forgotten me;
my female servants count me as a stranger;*

*I have become an alien in their eyes. (Job 19:14)*

Here is a sketch of his story:

The opening and closing chapters of the book amount to a brief ancient fable or folk-tale into which a long narrative poem about God and suffering is tucked. It’s pretty easy to see the seams between the two.

In the folktale, Job is a wealthy and righteous man, with ten children, “seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants.”

One day God is chatting with one of his heavenly deputies, a kind of gadfly type whose name is Satan but who the scripture version we heard read this morning calls the “adversary.” He acts as God’s prosecuting attorney. This adversary informs God that he has been vacationing on earth. God interrupts quickly to ask him, “Did you, by chance, run into my servant, Job when you grabbed a latte at Starbucks? In the righteousness department, he’s #1.”

And this adversary character replies that of course Job is righteous -- he has been blessed with riches and God has protected him from all harm.

So God, (acting here more like a capricious Greek God on Mt Olympus than the sometimes benevolent God of the ancient Hebrews) accepts this as a challenge. God tells this adversary, “Very well, all that Job has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against his person!’ So the adversary disposes of Job’s children in what sounds like a sudden tornado and sees that all Job’s wealth is confiscated.

*Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshipped God. He said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.’ In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing. (Job 1:20-22)*

Now, we come to today’s reading, in which God allows the adversary to attack Job’s health, as well and Job is left sitting among the ashes of his life. Still he refuses to curse the Lord for his misfortune.

Now, Satan, the adversary, only appears in this opening folktale; he vanishes from the rest of the book. As I said, a later editor adds huge middle section in which the question of why humans suffer is examined in a drama in which Job debates with his friends over whether he is personally at fault or totally innocent, and then Job debates God. I preached a sermon on this a couple of years ago, but today I want to look at the book from another point of view.

In the early “ancient folktale” section of the book we find Job’s wife. Like the adversary, she also appears, and then quickly disappears from the narrative. She only gets two sentences: ‘Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die.”

Job rebukes her for it. But she’s gotten a very bad rap for thousands of years based on this short exchange. Let’s consider the context. She, like Job, has lost her ten children. God is complicit in their untimely demise (to put it mildly). And, look, her response while kind of abrupt, is much more human. She’s lost her babies for heaven’s sake. Her naked anger is, frankly, much healthier than her husband’s piety.

Here is why. One commentator, F. Rachel Magdalene, says that what is happening to Job amounts to *torture.* Everything he has and everything he is, is being destroyed. He loses his wealth. He loses his household. He loses his children. He loses his health. And, as we read, after the first series of losses, ‘In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing’.

The aim of torture, Magdalene writes, is for the person being tortured to lose *their* understanding of the world, and replace it with the torturer’s understanding. If you have ever read George Orwell’s *1984*you may remember the last paragraph. The protagonist, Winston Smith, is tortured to the point that he breaks down and begins to beg the torturers to hurt his girlfriend instead. The book ends with him totally brain-washed:

*He gazed up at the enormous face [of Big Brother]. Forty years it had taken him to learn what kind of smile was hidden beneath the dark moustache. O cruel, needless misunderstanding! O stubborn, self-willed exile from the loving breast! Two gin-scented tears trickled down the sides of his nose. But it was all right, everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother.*

The aim of torturers is to get the tortured person to “love Big Brother.” In the case of the Book of Job, that would mean Job accepting that his torture is legitimate punishment; that he has sinned, and that God is appropriately reproving and disciplining him.

Job’s friends expend a lot of energy trying to convince Job of his guilt. Well, to be fair, Job never quite accepts it. His attitude is like the writer of *Ecclesiastes* who says, “There is a time for everything” in our lives.

Here again is Job’s version of that: “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. Shall we accept the good at the hand of God, and not accept the bad?”

But looking at this through the lens of Orwell’s 1984, Job’s wife’s admonition, ‘Curse God, and die,’ suggests a form of resistance to torture. That form is martyrdom. According to Job’s wife rather than accepting the worldview of the torturer, the person being tortured can refuse to accept the torturer’s world view and, instead, die.

Another commentator, Murray J. Haar, reads the Book of Job in the light of the Holocaust. He has a twentieth-century Job, a non-Jew as the biblical Job was, observe a mass murder in a small Polish village. After the massacre, Haar writes:

*Job began to see where he had gone wrong in the land of Uz, his home. He remembered that when it had come time for him to stand face to face with the Almighty, he backed down before God. In the end, Job realized that he had submitted to God, not out of wisdom or renewed faith, but out of fear.*

Haar argues that nothing in scripture can stay the same after the Holocaust. Everything must be re-read in light of the murders of the six million.

So, reading the book of Job through the lens of the Holocaust we can see that maybe we should *not*accept the bad from God’s hands as well as the good. It would be unfair to his dead children. Maybe Job’s wife is right; maybe Job *should*charge God with wrongdoing; maybe he *should*curse the God who has allowed this evil.

Forty-nine years ago, I saw the Holocaust survivor, Elie, Wiesel, speak on the Book of Job at Willamette University. Wiesel took Job’s wife’s part and said that when God finally speaks up near the end of the book and asks Job, “Where were you when I created the world,” Job should have responded to God with the word, “Bull-shit.”

Now, in the middle section of the book written much later, Job doesn’t totally let God off the hook. There, Job complains to God in a kind of civil suit.

Jobs argues that God is punishing an innocent man. Job demands that God answer for it. It is the Amnesty International option. And luckily, because God is a somewhat reasonable torturer, unlike the Nazis, it works. God rebukes Job’s friends who have all agreed that Job must be a huge sinner and deserves to lose everything.

However, this is where the metaphor breaks down, because in the Book of Job, God is both the ultimate source of the torture *and* the court to which Job appeals. Come to think of it, it’s not that different from having Donald Trump as your adversary, and appealing to John Robert’s court, right? How can you get a fair hearing?

With that all said, I haven’t really said a word about how broken a man Job must be – how very lonely he (and his wife) must be. They’ve lost their children and, instead of growing closer, they’ve actually grown apart. Sadly, this happens in life.

Then there is the case of Job’s friends. They’re idea of God is black and white – God is a God of rewards and punishments and nothing more. Job holds fast to a more nuanced view and it costs him his bond with them. But since their bond was based on they’re all being elite, country-club, rich guys, the bond was always intensely competitive and tenuous.

Finally there is what I find to be a very unsatisfying ending to the ancient folktale (that forms the beginning and ending of the book). The part where God rewards Job for knuckling under.

The writer of the folktale clearly thought this ending makes everything all better, however, we certainly can see it would just make Job all the more lonely for his lost loved ones; that is, if he is any kind of a person with feelings.

Here is that original ending:

*The Lord restored Job’s fortunes and gave him twice as much as he had before … He had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen and a thousand donkeys. And he also had seven sons and three daughters … Nowhere in all the land were there found women as beautiful as Job’s daughters, and their father granted them an inheritance along with their brothers.*

Well, here is the poet Anna Kamienska’s take on this unsatisfactory ending. It’s in her poem, “The Return of Job.”

*Job survived washed his body of blood sweat pus
and lay down in his own house again
New friends were already gathering
a new wife was breathing new love into his mouth
new children were growing up with soft hair
for Job to touch with his hands
new sheep donkeys oxen were bellowing
shaking new shackles in the stable
kneeling on straw

But happy Job didn't have the strength to be happy
afraid he'd betray happiness by a second happiness
afraid he'd betray life by a second life*

Can you hear the particular loneliness in that?

In central London there is a bronze statue of a famous man sitting on a bench overlooking the River Thames. A few meters in front of him is a bronze figure of his daughter who had died before him. As he sits, in his old age, his imagination plays tricks on him, and it is as if he sees his daughter alive again. It is a poignant picture of what Kamienska is getting at in her poem.

Thursday evening at our monthly Deacons meeting I said that I have been reading lately about a reported “epidemic of loneliness” in America. I asked the gathered deacons if they felt that, or sensed it and could describe it.

One said that social media is a substitute for friendship. A kind of counterfeit. And I thought, “Of course!” We have Facebook friends, but they are at a remove. Better than not having any friends, maybe, but are they really our “friends? “ Can we count on them for more than a sympathetic emogee when we are hurting?

Another of our deacons spoke of going to public restaurants and observing people eating together at the same table but everyone is looking at their phone.

That reminded me of a story that opens a wide window on that reality.

I watched something on Oregon Public Broadcasting a few years ago.  It was documentary on Coffee Shops around the country.  It was so well done. It wasn’t about coffee, really. It was about people.

The segment from that hour program that I remember was about a lovely bare brick place in old downtown Missoula, Montana.  They interviewed a patron in his 60s. He'd been coming into the place every morning for a year and hadn't met a soul.  Everyone sat at their own table and studied their phones.

One night at 3:00am his wife suddenly became critically ill.  He went to the hospital where she died. He came home, didn't sleep, and then went to the coffee place at 6:30am when it opened.  The owner met him at the door, hugged him and as the others came in, they all gathered around him. And then around 9:00am they all went to his house to clean it and, knowing his family would be coming soon, they filled his refrigerator.

That changed everything at the coffee place after that. They became extended family.

It can happen. People can be rescued from the desert of their phones.

You know, sometimes we don’t even know we are lonely until we find community. Maybe the church can be such a place.

One can hope. We definitely need that.

Amen