

B Lectionary 30 10.27.24 – Reformation Sunday  
Job 42:1-6, 10-17  
Focus Statement: There is always life after death.

One of the fascinating things about having a baby is it's like a little science experiment lives in my house. It's incredible all the things he has to learn to do that I had just taken for granted as how bodies work. Like his vision. I knew babies can only see very close in front of them, but what I didn't know is that it wasn't really his eyes that didn't work yet, it was his brain. There's a little bit of development of the retina in the first few weeks that helps them regulate light and dark, but after that it's their brains that have to learn how to process the information their eyes are seeing. They figure out high contrast things first, bold black and white images. Then bright colors, then their brains figure out how to coordinate their eyes to work together to focus and track objects, then depth perception. His brain had to learn to see.

It's been interesting watching him figure all this out. I remember he was less than a month old and I realized he'd fixed his attention on something. Which was weird, because he mostly just slept, so his eyes were usually closed. On the rare occasions they were open, he just staring blankly into space. Seeing he was looking at something, I realized our cat was standing in the window. And because she's all black, he could see the contrast of her against the outside light of the window. It was like one of his bold contrast books come to life, and he was fascinated by it.

Learning how to make our eyes and brains work together happens for all of us as infants, but it can happen at other phases of life too. If you have a stroke you could lose some or all

vision not because your eyes are affected, but because your brain is. Your brain may not be able to process the information coming through your eyes the same way. And you may not be able to get all the vision back, but there are therapies to retrain your brain to process vision through different pathways. Which is fascinating if you think about it, the way brains work. I'm tempted here to tell you another story about brains, but we'll never get to Job if I do, so catch me after the worship service for that one. The point of all this is, how we see the world, physically yes, but also metaphorically, changes throughout our lives, as our brains grow and change and learn to process information differently.

What does this have to do with Job? To recap, Job went from having a pretty good life to being just absolutely crushed by tragedy. His livestock, his family, his health, were taken from him in an instant, and he was left with nothing but suffering. His friends showed up to comfort him, but their idea of comfort was to tell him he must have done something to deserve his pain. Then last week we heard about how God showed up and was like, suck it up, buttercup, I created the whole universe and its bigger than you. And while this does not seem like the most comforting thing to me, for Job somehow, miraculously, that helped. Somehow, like Nik learning to see shapes and colors, that was the reframing Job's brain needed so it could learn to focus on things that had always been there that he hadn't been able to focus on before, a world so much greater than his imagination, to shake him loose from his suffering.

I say somehow, but the more I've sat with Job and wrestled with Job and struggled with Job over the past few weeks, the more this realization made sense to me. Job wanted answers,

some explanation for what he was going through. But, as I read in a reflection by Frederick Buechner, suppose God had given Job answers, suppose God had explained to Job exactly why it was that his livestock was stolen, his children killed, and his health destroyed. No explanation would have changed anything. Buechner wrote, "Understanding in terms of the divine economy why his children had to die, Job would still have to face their empty chairs at breakfast every morning. Carrying in his pocket... a complete theological justification of his boils, he would still have to scratch and burn. God [didn't] reveal God's grand design. God reveal[ed] Godself. God didn't show why things are as they are. God showed God's face. And Job said, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see you."<sup>1</sup> God's speech out of the whirlwind expanded Job's mind so he could know what once he'd only believed.

The story of Job teaches us that we are not alone in our suffering. That there is a world so much bigger than us, so much more complex and complicated and intricate than we can imagine. Job does not attempt to explain why bad things happen to good people, it simply tells us that they do, and there is no explanation for them other than that God is bigger than our explanations. And that, whether you can sit with it right now or not, is the promise of a God who is stronger, more powerful, more present than any explanation. One commentary I read spoke of a woman who lost her son in a tragic automobile accident and on the morning of his funeral sat down and read God's speech out of the whirlwind because, she said, "I needed to know that my pain was not all there was in the world." That is what the

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, "Job," *Wishful Thinking*, Harper and Row Publishers: New York, 1973, p. 47.

book of Job promises us. That as all-consuming as our suffering may be, there is a life, a world, a reality, beyond even the worst pain, and a God who is in control of it all.

So Job had this incredible epiphany about the power of God, and then he got all his stuff back, and twice what he had before. And if we read it like that, twice as much stuff and, look, more kids, it feels like a pretty trite ending. Yeah Job had these horrible things happen to him, but God gave him all his stuff back in the end, no harm, no foul. But reading the details of these last verses, I think there's something more profound, and more helpful, than the author simply trying to stick a "happily ever after" onto Job's life, so we can all go home satisfied. First off, notice the details about how Job's fortunes were restored. Verse eleven reads, "Then there came to Job all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and they ate bread with him in his house; they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him—even here the book resists giving us and God an easy out—and each of them gave Job a piece of money and a gold ring." And it was only after that, after the gifts of time and support from his friends and family that the text tells us that "The Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning," with the description of twice the animals than he'd had at the start. Job's life and fortunes were not just magically restored in an instant by some snap of God's divine fingers, they were rebuilt through community, through the love and the care, the sympathy and the support of those who loved him.

And, the text goes on, verse thirteen, "he also had seven sons and three daughters." An interesting twist on how children, people really, are normally described in scripture, the

daughters are named but not the sons. Beautiful daughters, whom Job gave “an inheritance along with their brothers,” clearly something out of the ordinary, since the text took the time to point it out. The naming, the description of the inheritance, the details, all this tells us, I think, that these were not replacement children, as if children could be replaced. As if the lives of our loved ones could be returned to us with an insurance claim. These children were not a restoration of what he had lost, they were a whole new thing, proof of Job’s resurrection, of his ability to love again. Nothing could replace the death of Job’s children. What courage Job showed, in the face of such loss, to have more children, to open his heart to love again, but also to the possibility for loss again. I’m sure for the rest of his one-hundred and forty years, Job looked out across the land where the homes of his first children had stood with sadness for all he had lost, even as the shouts of his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren told of all the love he had yet to gain. When we lose someone we love, experience deep pain, heartbreak, grief, it can feel in the moment that suffering is all there is and all there ever will be, but the promise of resurrection is that that is simply not true. There is always more to our stories. Grief never goes away, but it changes, and we live and love beyond it. We live and love beyond it, because there is more on the other side. The book of Job shows us that even the worst thing that can happen is never the last thing that will happen. Hope always follows despair, joy always replaces suffering, life always triumphs over death, no matter what. That is the promise of the resurrection, of a God who through the cross wrested life from death.

I’ve been closing all these sermons with words from someone else, and today I’m going to let you close with someone else’s words. The hymn of the day is meant to be your

congregational response to the reading. Kind of unfair because I pick it for you, but there you go. Our Hymn of the Day today is an old classic. You may be familiar with it, but you may not know the story behind it. I'd forgotten the story of it until Joyce mentioned it in Bible chat on Wednesday, and it felt like the perfect encapsulation of what we've been talking about. This hymn was written by the hymnist Horatio Spafford. Writing hymns wasn't all Spafford did, he was also a successful lawyer, businessman, and father of four daughters, Annie, Maggie, Bessie, and Tanetta. All was going well for Spafford until the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 and the economic downturn of 1873 tanked his business dealings. Spafford decided to travel with his family to England to start again, but caught up in zoning issues surrounding the fire, he sent his wife, Anna, and their four daughters ahead of him. In the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, the ship they were traveling on collided with another ship and sank quickly. 226 people were killed in the incident, including all four of Spafford's daughters. Anna, upon her rescue, sent Spafford a two-word telegram which must have been the most gut-wrenching of his life, "Saved alone..." Spafford traveled to England to meet his grieving wife, and as his ship passed the spot where his four daughters had died, he was inspired to write this hymn. Notice the name of the tune, the SS Ville du Havre was the name of the ship that sank.

The Book of Job doesn't give us answers, clarification, or easy explanations. What it gives us instead is the promise of a God who is bigger than our wildest understanding, and who lives beyond our tragedies, so that we can live too. Thanks be to the God who has and will always conquer death. Amen.