

“The Value of Being Honest with God”

Job 23:1–9, 16–17

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My mother-in-law was like a second mother to me. After my mother died with a cerebral aneurysm at forty-eight, Dana’s mother became more like a mother. They were different in many ways. Dana’s mother was a traditional stay-at-home mom while my mother was an English literature professor and a frontline feminist. But they were both vibrant forces of nature and quite outspoken. I often called my mother-in-law a loose cannon because she was so direct with her opinions and this often made her visits to the churches I served interesting.

But her honesty was a virtue and some people appreciated it. When the head of the large tobacco company for which my father-in-law worked whistled for another drink at a cocktail party, she raised her eyebrow at him. “Joann, you think I am rude?” he said, to which she replied, “Yes, I do.” Dana’s father thought that might be the end of his job, but the man appreciated someone being honest with him so much that he would have Joann sit next to him at dinner parties.

Honesty in human relationships is a virtue — though it is okay to have some filters, some unspoken thoughts — and it is a quality to seek in our relationship with God. My youth minister repeatedly told our youth group that the one thing God wants from us more than anything else is honesty. I believe that, for without honesty in any relationship, it is difficult know what we have, and trust is not possible. The truth is God knows what we think, whether we are honest or not. The psalmist says even before a word is on our tongue, God knows it completely (Psalm 139:4). So, we might as well be honest. It can lead to good things.

Job understands this reality. In fact, many biblical characters do. Moses complains to God about the whining bunch of ungrateful people he is trying to lead to the Promised Land. But Job really speaks his mind. The text we have read is just one example of this reality, but in this text, Job does not mince words. When know the basic story. He has been faithful to God, even God

agrees with his assessment, but he has suffered mightily — the loss of livestock, servants, children and health — all because of an agreement God has made with Satan, as the story goes, to prove that he will remain faithful even when his faith is not rewarded.

To add insult to injury, Job has been badgered by friends who assume he is being punished for some sin and they want him to confess. So now, Job lets out his rage. He says his complaint is bitter, or perhaps better translated, rebellious. He is angry and trying to let God know, but God seems to be in hiding. “Oh, that I knew where to find God,” Job cries. He has his case ready, his argument for the court prepared, but God is nowhere to be found. Job is even angrier about this! But what can he do, other than express his anger to whomever will listen?

The passage ends with a couple of verses that are obscure in Hebrew, difficult to translate and even more difficult to interpret. Perhaps this is the writer’s way of covering up Job’s profanity... But the sense seems to be that even in his anger, Job realizes he is talking to God. And so, he feels a sense of awe or fear, and he seems to long for some great darkness to enable him to hide. God has been veiled in mystery. Perhaps he can be veiled too.

But what is clear in all of this is that Job expresses what he is feeling without worrying about offense. On one level, this may seem natural to us, but for many of us, it is not. We were taught to speak with respect to our elders, teachers and leaders. And when speaking to God, these standards were raised exponentially. We would never dream of expressing anger or frustration to the Master of the universe, the Redeemer of our souls, even if this very Master and Redeemer asks us to. As a result, many of us need a little encouragement to be honest.

I recently shared with our church this prayer of a rural southern preacher included in a biography of Harry Emerson Fosdick.

Lord, send us rain. The ground is dry and hot and burns the bare feet walking over it. The tobacco leaves next to it are curling up. The cotton plants are wilting in the sun. The corn stalks are already stunted in their growth, the fodder leaves are withering, there won’t be anything but nubbins, and Lord thou knowest I hate worse than hell to shuck

nubbins. So, Lord, send us rain. Don't send us any flimsy dizzle drazzle. Send us a gully washer and a trash mover. (*Harry Emerson Fosdick*, by Robert Moats Miller, p. 239)

It may seem irreverent, but how respectful can dishonesty be? God encourages us again and again in scripture to be honest.

Consider the words of Psalm 137. The writer begins with the hauntingly beautiful image of weeping by the waters of Babylon and hanging up harps. "How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" the writer cries. But the psalm ends with these words directed to the enemy Babylon which are just haunting. "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against a rock!"

It is an expression of deep anger toward an oppressor, more than a lament, it is a curse! This is an imprecatory psalm. The only time I have used it in its entirety was at a prayer service on September 12, 2001. It was not the only psalm we read, and it wasn't the last. But we needed space, permission really, to feel angry about the events of 9-11, not so that we could seek revenge as Christians, so that eventually we could seek something better. We needed space to be honest.

All of us need this kind of space at some point — when we know loss or disappointment, when one bad thing happens after another. COVID-19 has made us feel this way for over a year and a half. Even if we embrace the required safety measures of vaccines, masks and distancing, it is still frustrating. And many of us have lost patience with people who refuse to acknowledge reality... Those who have taken up the fight for racial justice, whether anew in recent days or for the first time, need space to express the rage that comes from being oppressed or watching others be oppressed. Holding anger in is self-destructive. God has given us permission to be honest about what we think and feel.

But it's not just that honesty allows us to get our feelings out; it also helps us remain connected to the God who is still with us and for us. Christian Wiman has said that "the cry of faith, even if it is a cry against God, moves toward God, and has its meaning in God (*My Bright Abyss*, 2013)." Such is the case with the cry of Job. Job expresses anger and frustration, but he expresses his feelings to God, he talks to God whom he says will not just

play the power card but will give heed to him. Even as he feels betrayed, he trusts God to hear him, and while he says God is nowhere to be found, he also says he is terrified by God's presence.

I recall praying as a teenager that if God were real, I might be given evidence. A seminary professor of mine, Alan Culpepper, offered a similar prayer as a child, but he asked for something specific, for the top drawer of his dresser to be filled with fish. My request was general, but immediately after offering it, I wondered how I would feel if the Creator of the universe showed up in a discernable way. I was filled with a sense of awe that in itself felt like a kind of awareness of the Holy.

Sometimes we sense God's presence in a mysterious way, but we sense it when we remain open to God, when we remain in conversation with God, no matter what the nature of our conversation. In expressing our feelings honestly, we keep the door open. We don't always get what we want. There are no easy answers to the question of suffering, at least not any that endure. But at the end of all of our expressions of anger, all of our questions and doubts, we find something helpful — God. God is still there, listening to us, comforting us, holding us.

I worked with a seminary student who was at a difficult place on his journey. He had been raised to talk to God with respect. He had also been raised with a rigid view of providence wherein God was in control of everything. He did not feel free to question anything. This worked for a while. Then, he lost a child to a tragic accident. This turned his world upside down, but certain ideas had been hammered into him. So, he tried to hold on to them. Then, he lost another child to another tragic accident. And his worldview no longer worked nor could he hold in the pain or the rage he felt. He needed a different view of providence, but he also needed the freedom to be honest with God. It was a messy time, that conversation with the Divine did not sound very respectful, but it was Holy, because it was honest, and it led to the recovery of faith.

Whatever we have to say, whatever we are feeling at any point in life, God can take it, God understands it, and God will be there when we are drained of all our emotion and in need of love to hold us, just to hold us, until we can stand on our own. Thanks be to God, amen!