Springfield Presbyterian Church

September 3rd, 2023

Job’s Lament and Loss

I.

 In full pastoral disclosure, I go through cycles where I’m not a huge fan of the book of Job. Why? It bums me out, especially if I look at it with this premise – Job was this prosperous, great guy, who basically said, “Hey, I have faith in God, nothing can get me down. God’s always there.” Was he being too prideful? Was he just really sure of his faith? It’s hard to say, but either way, whatever his intentions are - the storm comes – everything unravels, his life, his joy turns to suffering, and things blow up. If you leave the book there, I’m not sure where the good news lies.

 It truly is the book that taps into the question, “Why do bad things happen to good people – good people like Job, who are just trying to be faithful people?” And when things don’t go his way, and in a very human way – he’s grumpy about it. And he isn’t grumpy so much at God – but he’s at a breaking point where his despair has set in. And as a human, fair enough.

 This is where the text comes in today, I think it’s the saving grace. It’s sometimes called, ‘a hymn of wisdom’ where Job says that God is wisdom and to depart from evil is wisdom. Job doesn’t get his answers, he doesn’t get any cookie-cutter reasons for why his vision of his faith didn’t play out in the way he thought they would. Job surrenders, he surrenders to God, to wisdom – to the recognition and knowledge that God is greater than any of our plans. He doesn’t give up on God and God doesn’t give up on him –but Job instead admits one of the hardest things that we have to do as humans, “I don’t have the answers, but God does.” End of sentence.

II. Mystery

 If that makes you itchy, join the club. While I like to think of myself as a bit of a modern day hippie, I have to also admit that knowledge and learning make me feel more grounded. Or, at least that’s what I like to think. It turns out the more I learn, the less I am totally sure about. But, regardless, as humans, we want security and protection and to feel grounded – to live in mystery is simply uncomfortable.

 Here’s the kind of bad news of the text and this life of faith – uhm, faithfulness is all about living in mystery. Faithfulness requires me to say, “God is God, and I am not.” Faith asks me to believe and act, even when I cannot see. Faith says that even when I’m pushed to what I feel is my limit, that God is still at work within me. Faith is hard.

 Let’s get real in some hard ways. For me, faith requires me to look at my disability and with a long sigh and grunt, acknowledge that God might be doing something with it that I cannot comprehend – and I can be righteously angry about it, but I can I also trust that the reasons are beyond me. I can still know that God loves me and be frustrated with the mystery at the same time. I believe wholeheartedly that God honors that space within me and walks with me.

 For others, it might look different – let’s say, like our friend Job here, the loss of a job becomes very real. All the sudden, the ground below you feels less safe – it feels like things are shifting. How much money do we have in reserves – if we do at all? What do we tell the kids? How do we try to jump back in the job market, now that we’re discouraged? Again – what is God doing in this mystery that feels awful?

 Or maybe, and harness your inner youth here, remember your days in middle school. For most of us, you couldn’t pay us enough to go back to those days. As school starts, I’m thinking about them more and all they have to face. When they find their first love and maybe lose their first love. When the world seems chaotic, because it can be, and they feel lost. They’re asked what they want to do for the rest of their lives career-wise and I’m not sure many adults have that figured out. They have pressure heaped upon them. They have all the reasons in the world to look at you and me and up above and say, “where is God in this? You know, the nice one I heard about in Sunday School who loves me?” And fair enough, fair enough – because this is a foundational space for faith to grow and we have to look back at them and say, “it’s a mystery, but God is still love – let’s walk through this together.”

 Faith. Faith is hard. It is a mystery. There are no easy answers and if I left the sermon right here in this moment – these things would all still be true. But the good news is that I’m not going to do that – and there is indeed good news – it is just a little harder to see and feel in the midst of life’s struggles.

IV. Good news

So, let’s go with the good news. Let me frame it through the words of Madeleine L’Engle, who wrote, *A Wrinkle in Time*. She was also an artist and spiritual writer, and I recently read one of her notable lines, where she says, “God doesn’t stop the bad things from happening; that was never part of the promise. The promise is: I am with you now until the end of time.”

And, L’Engle is right. Look in your Bible and you’ll find there’s no concrete promise or covenant that bad things won’t happen. We hear people yearning for it, like in the psalms – where humans are crying out for protection. It’s not that God is mean, it is not that God does not want to make that promise to us because there is growth in the mystery. If we understood it all, would God really be God? It’s not vengeance. As Job faces, and we face today – it is not a lack of God’s love that is in question, it is our ability to trust in God’s goodness in a mystery that we cannot understand.

III. Visual

Maybe I can better paint the good news in a visual that I heard some time ago, but it still proves to be helpful. Let’s think of God as an artist, as a weaver, creating this massive tapestry up in the skies. God is shifting the loom and mixing the colors and fragments – and in our world, when God is doing that, it means that our lives are moving along, things are changing – some things are coming to light and life and some things are dying.

God continues to weave and weave, and if we were able to see the woven tapestry, we would be looking at it from the underside. Have you ever done needlework or cross-stitch? The front looks beautiful, but the underside is a hot mess. It is a collaboration of threads tied up into one another and though you might see glimpses of colors or letters, you can’t see much – you cannot envision from the back what the front will look like.

But God can see the front of that tapestry, weaving and mending, pulling each thread closer. From the Earth, as we look at the underside, we, as people of faith, need to trust in the mystery of the tapestry. We have to accept that God is creating a beautiful piece of art and all we see are the scraps right now. My hope, in this metaphor, does come into real life – I hope, when my days have ended and I’m up in Heaven with God, that I can be in complete awe of that tapestry. I can look at God and say, “I didn’t know what you were doing there, or there, or there – but now it all makes sense.” But until that day, until that promised resurrection – we all are down here looking at the tapestry and wondering what God is doing with us in this world.

IV. Lean In

So, today, if you are in the pews and being human and saying, “I don’t like this mystery thing. I want to see the tapestry and I want answers.” Well, I’m with you – that would make for a lovely faith life, but...that’s not our reality.

 I’m going to ask you to unravel with me. Live in the mystery together. That’s one of the reasons we have this community before us – because we were never called to try and slog through life’s complexities alone. So, lean in, lean into the discomfort, the mystery, but at the same time – let us lean into the knowledge that God is with us, for us, and loves us – even when we can’t understand it. Lean in, unravel, because finding yourself in the mystery is the only place in which you can start to piece things back together again. Amen.