What Do You Need?

A meditation on Job 2: 11 – 13 and 2 Timothy 4: 9 – 18

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church August 22, 2021

Multiple times a day I ask my dog, Lily Rose, “what do you need, baby?” Her needs are simple and few. Food. Water. Sunbathing. A lap. Communion bread leftovers on Sundays. She communicates by walking over and placing her paw on top of my foot. Time for a back scratch. Time for a treat. Time for a walk in the garden. Pretty easy to read.

I think back to those days when my sons were so little, just learning to talk. They could babble away, knowing exactly what they were saying, but I was left clueless. I believe it was our first born who had an utter meltdown over the word “marshmallow.” It must have been winter, hot chocolate season. Completely out of the blue he began asking for a “maller,” and we could not begin to decipher what he was trying to say. I think we finally held him up in our arms in front of the cabinet so he could show us what it was he so desperately needed. “Maller!” he shouted, as he pointed to the bag, relieved that we finally understood.

Our youngest son didn’t even have to speak his requests out loud. As the youngest of three stairsteps, he simply pointed at whatever it was he wanted, and one of his brothers got it for him. They spoke for him, and, at that age, he didn’t mind.

“What do you need?” It’s the follow up question to last week’s “Where does it hurt?” The prelude to next week’s, “Where do we go from here?” Think of how many times you have said these very words – in the course of an ordinary day. “Need anything from the kitchen?” “I’m running to the store – do you need anything?” It is the most ordinary of questions and the most extraordinary of questions. We ask it in the most mundane circumstances, and in the most vulnerable. In the patterns of our ordinary days and in times of sorrow, or crisis, or illness.

Some of our needs are simple, and we can communicate them easily, not unlike the way my Lily Rose expresses her needs. Sometimes we wish we didn’t even have to speak them aloud, that someone else would voice them for us. And sometimes we just wish someone could understand what it is we are trying to express when we don’t have the words.

If you missed the children’s story this morning, rewind and watch it. It’s called *The Rabbit Listened* (written and illustrated by Cori Doerrfeld). A young person named Taylor has a rough day, and everyone wants to help, but they want to help Taylor in the way that they would want to receive help – by chatting about it, or venting their anger, or laughing, or hiding – you get the picture. Finally, Rabbit shows up, and just sits with Taylor. Rabbit sits close by and waits. When Taylor is ready to chat, they chat together. When Taylor is ready to vent, they vent together. When Taylor is ready to laugh, they laugh together, and when Taylor is ready to try again, Rabbit is there to encourage.

It may be a children’s book, but it’s a story for us all. As Rabbit demonstrates, learning what someone needs is born from being present and waiting…it’s not unlike the reading from the prologue of Job, one of our texts for this morning. Job’s story is one of creation, devastation and recreation; the exploration of what happens to faith in the face of tragedy.

We find Job at a complete and utter loss. All ten of his grown children are dead, the result of a house collapse. In an instant they are gone. In grief, he tears his clothes, shaves his head, and falls down before God in worship. In worship, because where else could he turn? While grieving, he breaks out in sores all over his body. His wife, struggling under the weight of her own sorrow, suggests he should give up on God, give up on life.

Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, three of his friends, interject themselves into this brutal scene. To care for him? To help pick up the pieces? Even from a distance they can tell that Job is not himself. They, too, tear their garments, and go to sit with him. Further into the story, they will each take their turns to say hurtful things to Job, but for now they seem to know what to do. Sit. Be still. Listen for God. They don’t put additional strain on Job by expecting him to talk about what’s happened. They don’t urge him to raise his voice in anger. They don’t tell him he’s “got to be strong” or that “he can have other children.” The sit in the ashes with Job.

Entering into someone’s pain is a privilege and a risk. Job’s friends had to be willing to look at his pain. They had to witness the physical transformation brought on by suffering, when looking the other way would have been much less of a sacrifice. We want to respond to someone’s pain in a way that will make us feel better, make us feel like we are able to “do” something. Sometimes, we can do something. Sometimes a meal is exactly what is needed – “I care” in the form of a casserole is a powerful expression! Sometimes it is a phone call or a text message or a card. But often, the most vital work we can do is be present, trusting that our presence is a tangible reminder of God’s presence, God’s compassion.

Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar sit in silence with their friend for seven days and nights, a traditional Hebrew mourning ritual. But what death are they grieving? Are they honoring the lives of Job’s children or are they acknowledging the death of the life that Job once knew? As they all sit in silence, reflecting on who they have believed God to be, are their doubts, fears and questions rising to the surface? Isn’t that what happens to us, too, when we have to walk through our own suffering, or are confronted by the suffering of someone we love? We ask where God can be found when innocents die. We ask how God could allow such misery. We wonder who God is and how God is at work in the midst of evil or sorrow.

Theologian Steven Chase suggests that the silence in which we find Job and his friends is not only the silence of death. Yes, that is there, but there is something else. There is the possibility that this space is the womb in which new life is forming.[[1]](#endnote-1) In this space our souls have time. Busy-ness is set aside. Potential new life is forming in this space - hidden from view, still a mystery, even miraculous in its existence. These three friends will then become the voices in Job’s head, verbalizing all the perplexing, heart-wrenching theological questions confronting him. In a strange way, they will be co-laborers with him. It is risky, complex work, with no assured outcomes.

What do you need, Job? Job responds, “I need friends who are unafraid to voice all the terrifying questions that life has dropped in my lap. I need friends who don’t have all the answers but will be a sounding board. I need people who will stay through my deepest sorrows and most perplexing doubts. I need someone who will pray for my rebirth. I need a witness to my life.”

Which is what Paul, imprisoned in Rome, writing to his colleague, Timothy, also needs. Paul knows he will be executed; his time is limited. Though he does not fear death, there are things he needs to do one more time. He needs to see Timothy, who has been a faithful partner in ministry. He needs to see Mark, with whom he had a falling out, but was later reunited. He needs people whom he can trust, his close circle, those who understand him. Imagine – even as he writes these words, he is aware it will take Timothy and Mark many months of difficult travel to get to Rome. There is no assurance that they will make it before he dies, but he asks anyway.

What else does he need? He needs his coat before the winter comes, and just hearing the simplicity of that request is a bit painful. It reminds us of the conditions at the prison, of the conditions of all prisons. He needs his coat for comfort, for warmth. And he needs something else: his parchments and scrolls. How desperate he must have been for something to read, something to study. Not only to fill the hours, but also because he knew he didn’t have much time left. He had more studying to do before he left this earth.

We don’t know what was on those scrolls…stories of Jesus? Sermons? Old Testament commentary?[[2]](#endnote-2) Thomas Oden, in his commentary on the text imagines Paul meeting with Mark and Luke to discuss these scrolls, possibly even to encourage them to write down their stories of Jesus’ life.

What did Paul need? He needed what each of us needs: a witness to our lives. Through he had faced abandonment and sorrow, and now certain death, his faith had sustained him. He needed a witness so that others could know the abiding presence of God. He had confidence that as he “finishes the race” there will be a rebirth waiting him in God’s kin-dom.

“What do you need?” So often we are asked this, and we don’t know what to say. Unlike Paul’s cloak and scrolls, often is nothing concrete that will help. But maybe we begin by allowing others to be present to our pain. Trusting others to hear our stories, even as we say, “I don’t need you to fix it. I know you *can’t* fix it; I just need you to be a witness to my life. I need you to be the face of God in my time of doubt or fear or sorrow.”

What do you need?

Are your needs unspoken like Job’s?

Do you have a list in your head like Paul?

Do you have someone who will listen? And could you offer to listen to someone else? Even in this time of continued social distancing, of having to connect through screens and masks, especially in this time, can this faith community be the place where these conversations take place? Can this be a place of safety and trust for you?

And before we go, could we flip this question around and ask God, “What do you need?” Even as we ask, we can hear God say, “Be present with me, be a witness to my life. In the joys and sorrows that we share, sit with me. Be still and know that I am the God who birthed you,the God who continues to rebirth you through all your days.”

Thanks be to God for a love like that. Amen.

1. Steven Chase, *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible, Job*. (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), p. 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Thomas C. Oden, Interpretation: I and II Timothy and Titus. (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), p. 178. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)