

October 11, 2015
20th Sunday after Pentecost (Yr. B)
Job 23:1-9, 16-17 / Hebrews 4:12-16
The Rev. Carenda Baker

When I was a little girl, I remember fairly often waking up in the middle of the night and crying out into the darkness, “DAD-DY, I’m scared”. My father would faithfully come into my room and sit with me until I fell back to sleep. I hadn’t watched scary shows or movies before bedtime. And I don’t remember having any nightmares or bad dreams. I would just wake up scared, my heart racing, pounding furiously in my chest. I always said bedtime prayers, usually with my father. So I should have felt well protected from those night-time hebee-jeebes, right? Much later in life I figured out what I was feeling as a little girl when I would call out for my father. I was terribly frightened of being left all alone in the world, of being abandoned. So, repeatedly I called out for my father’s reassuring presence.

Today we visit again with Job, meeting him in the middle part of his story. We heard last week in the beginning of the story how Job remains steadfast and refuses to curse God and die. But now the patience of Job has worn thin. His friends have been no help, in fact they have made his suffering worse by telling him that he must have done something wrong, so he should just get off his high horse and confess it. Job knows that he has done nothing to bring this suffering on himself. Weary of his friends’ empty consolation and holier than thou insults to his character, Job is no longer able to maintain his stoic response to suffering and pain. He moves from a place of apparent acceptance of what has happened, to demanding an audience with God, so that God can answer some of HIS questions. Job begins to let himself feel and express anger about this injustice in his life. He curses the day he was born. He is feeling God-forsaken. He has a few things to say to God. If only he knew where to find God. *“If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.”* I want a hearing with you, God. But where are you?

Job has now moved to uttering passionate and powerful prayers of protest. He is complaining. He is pouring out his heart in lament to a God who seems nowhere to be found. Job’s cries of lament are the mirror opposite of another psalm, Psalm 139: “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.” Job’s lived experience, his felt reality is not of God’s close and inescapable presence, but of God’s absence.

The most well-known psalm, the 23rd begins, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want”. And probably the 2nd most familiar words of a psalm are the opening words of psalm 22 – “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me, and are so far from my cry and from the words of my distress?” The psalter is made up of many different kinds of

psalms – of thanksgiving and praise, wisdom, celebration of enthronement of kings. But the most frequently occurring of all psalms are the psalms of lament, complaint.

The psalms express intimate and deep relationship between the holy One and humanity. It is God who bids us move toward higher and deeper levels of truth telling. Old Testament scholar Ellen Davis has written that in the ancient world the complaint prayers found in the psalms are without parallel in other religions. In no other culture did people pray to their god in language that was so frank and even rude at times. People of other ancient religions prayed. They made requests, offered worship, even cursed their enemies. Only Israel in all the ancient world prayed this kind of complaint prayer. They believed that the Creator God cared about their pain, would hear their cries and could be expected to do something about it.

The psalms were Jesus' prayer book, so the words of Psalm 22 move from Jesus heart and mind to his lips when he cries from the cross "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The very act of crying out to God is a way of holding on to God with a fierce faith. Giving voice to our pain, our lament is a way of holding on to God even in the depths of despair. We need to speak our laments to God. We need to hear spoken aloud the thoughts of our own hearts. No matter what the feelings are, the story of Job and the psalms remind us of our need to reach out to God in honesty, for that is what helps keep the channel of communication open between us and God. When we speak our despair and disappointment, our anger and feelings of abandonment in the face of pain and suffering, it is as if the Spirit receives those words, breathes on those prayers and releases a tiny spark of hope. Speaking our sincere heartfelt prayers is a sign of faith and of intimate relationship with God.

To have the patience of Job is a good thing. But what we need even more in our relationship with God is thechutzpah of Job and the psalmists to passionately pray our protest and discontent, to stir up the ember of hope that God will hear and do something about our complaint, even if we feel God is absent.

I have a dear friend, Merry, who in her mid-30s walked with her husband Bob through a diagnosis and life changed by an inoperable brain tumor. Both Merry and Bob were devoted, faithful Christians. Of course being a Christian, or any other kind of faithful religious person does not inoculate any of us against heartbreak, disappointment, disease or death. We know how it sometimes plays out – despite the best medical care, the most aggressive and effective treatments, despite being grounded in faith and wrapped in the prayers of family and many friends – well, in a little less than a year, Bob died. They had been married for about eight years. Sometime later, a few years after Bob's death, Merry and I were talking about how difficult it is to listen for God speaking in your life, to discern what God is saying. Merry said to me: ***"You know, Carenda, at one point after Bob died, when I was trying to make my way forward, to figure out my next step, I said to God: 'I don't trust you.'"*** I was stunned by her candor. She had never talked to me about her intimate conversations with God during or after Bob's illness and death. But her words have stayed with me, and they have strengthened me in my own faith journey, especially at points when I've been anxious and struggling to

trust God with some part of my life. We want God to act in clear and powerful ways. We want a strong God who sets things right, and is unmistakably present. It is tempting when we are hurting to turn away from God and become bitter. What we are invited to learn is to open our hearts to God, to lay out as honestly as we can our feelings of doubt, disappointment, helplessness, fear, and whatever else is in our hearts. We need to ask God to make us bold in our praying, and to help us hold nothing back. We were created to know such deep intimacy with God. It is what God yearns for from us.

We have in our spiritual tool kit as Anglicans the ancient practice of praying the Daily Office. For the early monastics, praying all 150 psalms weekly was part of that practice. In her book *The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century*, Joan Chittister says that Benedict taught that “a full prayer life must be based on a total immersion in all the life experiences to which the psalms are a response. . . Ours is to be a full spiritual palate. We are to tap into every human situation the psalms describe and learn to respond to them with an open soul, an unfettered heart, and out of the mind of God.” And then she writes this about prayer: “The function of prayer is not to establish a routine; it is to establish a relationship with the God who is in relationship with us always. The function of times of prayer then is not to have us say prayers; it is to enable our lives to become a prayer outside of prayer, to become “pure of heart”, one with God, centered in the truth that is Truth and the power that is Power and the love that is Love.” [*The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century* – Joan Chittister].

The epistle reading from Hebrews reminds us that in Jesus we have come to know a God who gave up glory and power to join us in every aspect of our humanness. A God who embraces us, loves, and saves us in our weakness. A God who experiences the pain and brokenness of this world, and walks with us through it. A God who transforms all that is offered up to God to bring healing and hope and new life. A God who precedes and follows us, as today’s collect says, who always knows where we are, even if we’re not sure where God is. May the Holy Spirit lead us, and help us to pray and trust more deeply the God who loves us, and love more completely the God who is worthy of our trust in all things. Amen.

