

“What Is Saving Your Life Right Now? Feeling Pain”
Job 3:25-26, 16:13, 38:1-7

I recently read a Facebook post that went something like this, “Merry Christmas and Happy New Year !! I’m over 2020 - time to move on from the crazy that has been this year!” 2020 brought a lot of pain to our world and we still have six months to go! How do we deal with pain and suffering? Pandemic, mass unemployment and poverty, and racial injustice have stripped us of any sense of control or safety right now. The question of human suffering is as old as time. How do people deal with it? Generally speaking, most of us don’t enjoy experiences of pain and thus we try to avoid them or get over them as quickly as possible. Yet, pain and suffering are part of life, whether we welcome them or not. We often have little choice in the matter. The wisdom of faith is to enter courageously into our pain so that it may be healed and transformed. When we allow pain to make us more real, our capacity to live life more fully grows. Pain often strips the illusions control, security, and esteem.

In order to explore the practice of feeling pain, we are going to look at Job, the man in the Bible who is known for his suffering. You can say that he was experiencing a “2020” kind of year! He is presented to us as a good man who lived in a fertile land. He was living the good life, but then things began to quickly go bad for him. He lost his children, his wealth, and his health. By chapter two, Job was confronted with the eternal problem of innocent suffering. His wife even told him to curse God and die. Yet, the story of Job does not end up giving a real explanation of why people suffer. What we end up with is a pattern for our response to find our way through suffering. This pattern can be a healing way for us individually, but also as a nation and a world when we experience suffering. Here is the three-fold process:

1. **Lament:** A large part of the book of Job is lament. Job spoke about his experience of pain to God and to his friends. His pain needed to be heard. He needed to put words to his pain. The question that Job raised to God about suffering was a form of lament. In his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Rabbi Harold Kushner writes that all those “why me” questions in the book of Job are not really theological questions at all but are cries of pain. They are laments. What Job needed from his friends was not their answers but their compassion. This is an important part of going through painful experiences. We can’t move on to the happy stuff right away. The deeper the pain, the greater the lament needs to be. We know that when someone we love dies, we have to lament the loss. We have to take time to feel and express our feelings. We can choose not to do that, but the pain is never healed if we don’t. When someone we love is hurt, we have to hold the space for them to speak about their pain without rushing to fix it. We may even need to lament with them. This applies to both physical and emotional pain. We need others to lament with us when we are hurt. Job’s friends try to hush him by giving him easy answers. They present the traditional view that Job must have sinned and therefore deserved his suffering. They berate him to confess his sins, although they themselves could not think of what sins he needed to confess. It

made them uncomfortable to hear Job lament. When someone cries in front of us, we get uncomfortable. When we ourselves cry, we feel uncomfortable.

On national or global levels, we have a hard time with lament because it sounds unpatriotic and it makes us uncomfortable. With issues like racism, poverty, sexism, violence, or a pandemic, it is hard for us to hold the space for lament. To hear the voices of those who are suffering makes us uncomfortable, but it is important. Hearing the stories of those who have lost loved ones or their health to the pandemic is essential to our healing as a nation. Lamenting their loss as a nation is important. Lament is essential to healing. The power of lament is that it is not an intellectual exercise. It is about going deeply into the pain and letting it be. It is ultimately about becoming authentic and real in our lives. In his book, *Talking in the Dark: Praying When Life Doesn't Make Sense*, Steve Harper tells a story about a well-known United Methodist pastor and evangelist named Arnold Prater. He had developed a rather unrealistic pattern of prayer in his devotional life. Each day he would get up, go to his place of prayer, and begin one of those flowery pious prayers sprinkled liberally with Thees and Thous, O Thou omnipotent God, who dwellest in splendor and who reignest in glory from age to age, and so on. He said that even he could almost hear God drumming God's fingers on the banister of heaven out of boredom. But one day Prater woke up with a two-Excedrin headache. He stumbled to his prayer place, and with his head in his hands said, "God my head hurts!" And he said that in that moment he heard the voice of God deep in his soul saying, "Well, Arnold finally! Now you know how to pray." In the face of pain, he got real with God. And when he got real with God, God became real for him as well. That is the power of lament.

2. Listening: Job had to listen to God's voice in the midst of his pain. He listened even when God's answer didn't seem to make a lot of sense. In fact, it seems that God answers the questions with more questions. God does not give Job a clear answer, but instead, God questions Job's perspective on God's role in suffering and life. God reframes the question about innocent suffering to enlarge Job's limited human understandings and need for a logic of cause and effect. God reminds Job that life is not simple and that the world's mysteries are larger than any human perspective. The key to faith for Job was not regaining his sense of control or his understanding of the reasons behind his innocent suffering. It was instead about a change in his perspective so that he could focus on his relationship with God instead of trying to control the circumstances of his life. Life's mysteries cannot be solved with simple explanations. Only the soul is capable of navigating times of great pain because the soul relies on grace instead of fixated on logic and control. Part of the work during times of pain is listening to a higher wisdom. Paying attention to the larger frame of life reminds us that even if all seems to be lost, that is never the end. There is always potential for new life, even if it is on the other side.

3. Love: Job leans into his pain, listens to God, and then remains in love with God and allows God to love him. With this folktale of Job, this wisdom book, the people of ancient Israel were being challenged to grow in their understanding of God. They were

invited to let go of their worn-out belief that God punishes people for their sins. In its time, the book of Job was a very radical message about God's love. This became clearer to people of faith later in the person of Jesus. He showed that God walks the journey of suffering with us and loves us into wholeness. God never gives up on us. God was a faithful companion to Job in his suffering and is a faithful companion to us. The only power strong enough to get us through tough times is that of love. Finding ways to ground ourselves in love is essential to our wellbeing. Pain has a way of stripping away all of our illusions about what is important in life. When we go through a time of pain, we remember the primacy of love in our lives.

Wherever you are today on the spectrum of pain personally or globally, the invitation is to follow the threefold pattern of lament, listening, and love. There is no magic to the order because sometimes we have to feel loved before we can trust to lament and lean into our pain. Also, it is good to remember that this process is not always quick. In this moment of collective pain, what does this pattern of lament, listening, and love look like for you and for our world? Maybe recall a time in your life when you were able to lean into your pain, to lament. How was being able to lament and have others lament with you helpful? Then how did God give you a new perspective on life after that experience? How did love lead you to healing? The following exercise is from Barbara Brown Taylor. Maybe today or this week, take time to make a graph of your life, writing your birth date on the left and today's date on the right. Fill in the major events that have made you who you are. Notice how the spikes of pain helped grow or diminish as a person. Notice why some experiences helped you grow while others had the opposite effect on you. See if there is a connection between the ability to lament, listen, and love in times of great pain and the growth of your spirit.

We will end with words from Barbara Brown Taylor, "There will always be people who run from every kind of pain and suffering, just as there will always be religions that promise to put them to sleep. For those willing to stay awake, pain remains a reliable altar in the world, a place to discover that a life can be as full of meaning as it is of hurt. The two have never canceled each other out and I doubt that they ever will, at least not until each of us -or all of us together-find the way through." Amen.