

“Bitter Complaints”

Job 23:1-9, 16-17

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Author Barbara Ehrenreich is best known for a book about poverty called *Nickel and Dimed*, but the book of hers that made the biggest impact on me was one called *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*. As the title suggests, it’s an exploration and a critique of the prevalence of what she refers to as “positive thinking” in many parts of life, from medicine to education to religion to economics. She grounds the book in her own experience as a breast cancer patient. She writes about being diagnosed and finding herself worried, stressed, and angry – and understandably so! And how when she expressed these emotions, she would be exhorted to “think positive,” to be cheerful, to find the silver lining and the bright side. As her journey continued, she started to realize that many of these messages seemed to imply that her healing was dependent on her optimism – that if she continued to be worried and angry, she could not be cured. The implication was that if she could conjure up a sense of confidence that she would survive, her own attitude would bring that outcome to fruition. She started to realize that, although nobody ever came right out and said it, deep down, these messages also imply the converse: that someone who dies of cancer is at fault for not being positive enough, cheery enough, confident enough, optimistic enough. That didn’t seem right to her, and that led her to start exploring the ways that similar beliefs have seeped into various parts of our society. She suggests that even the financial crisis may have links to this phenomenon – that everyone from borrowers to bankers was trying to “think positive,” to be unrealistically optimistic about the risks and the debts and the chances that these bad loans would work out fine, until it all came crashing down.

That culture certainly imbues faith and spirituality in America. Indeed, as a pastor, I often encounter the assumptions of religious and non-religious folks alike (although actually more from the non-religious folks) that my job is to “help people think positive.” When I was doing a hospital chaplaincy internship as part of my training, I remember chatting with an acquaintance

who said “that must be hard work, spending all day with people who are in the hospital, trying to get them to stop thinking about their illness or injury and cheer up.” And when I said that I *didn't* try to get people to “stop thinking about it” or “cheer up,” she was absolutely flabbergasted. She couldn't imagine what else my job could possibly be.

To so many people, the life of faith is synonymous with a cheerful, positive, and optimistic outlook. But God created us with a rainbow of emotions – so why would we think that we are only allowed to paint our emotional lives in shades of cheery yellow sunshine? Why would we think that it is somehow unacceptable to God for us to be “blue” and sorrowful, to feel the red of righteous anger, or experience the grey of despondence? Humans are more complex than that, and so is our scripture – as we encounter in today's reading from Job.

Last week we heard about the dialogue in heaven which has led to Job's suffering – destitute, grieving, and afflicted with painful illness, he sits on the ash heap and suffers. In the intervening twenty chapters, Job's would-be friends have come to be with him. But instead of empathy and support, they have come with rationalizations, accusations, and platitudes. In long poetic speeches, they take turns explaining to him that God is good and just, and that surely Job must have sinned somehow to bring this suffering upon himself. They scold and admonish him to repent of his unknown sin, and when he argues against them, they excoriate him for speaking ill of the Lord and rebelling against godly teachings.

In today's reading, Job gives voice to his suffering and bewilderment in a poetic lament. He declares that he has bitter complaints to bring before the Lord, and proclaims his desire to lay his case before God. He envisions God as a judge, but says that he does not know where this judge is or how to find him. Nevertheless, he is sure that if he could only locate God, then God would hear his case, heed Job's arguments, and acquit him of guilt, relieving him of his suffering.

Job gives voice to a common experience for people of faith: it is not unusual, when in the midst of suffering and sorrow, to feel as if God is not present. Or, in some cases, the suffering and sorrow comes not from external circumstances, but from the spiritual experience of feeling as if God is absent.

Mother Teresa, the Catholic nun who lived an exemplary life of service caring for the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, who received the Nobel Peace Prize and was canonized as a Saint by the

Catholic church in 2015, lived that experience for decades. One would think, looking at her decades of faithful ministry, that she must have had a strong connection with God. But the 2007 publication of her letters revealed that, although she had had a strong sense of connection with God early in her life, including moments of hearing the voice of Jesus, for the final FIFTY YEARS of her life, she struggled with a persistent sense of God's absence. She wrote to a spiritual advisor, "In my soul I feel just that terrible pain of loss, of God not wanting me, of God not being God, of God not really existing." We now know that Mother Teresa struggled with this painful sense of abandonment for decades – and yet we know, as well, that she continued to do her work of caring for the poor, and continued her practices of prayer and worship, that she confided to spiritual advisors about her struggles, and that she did great good in the world even in the midst of her pain.

I think of her when I hear people oversimplifying the life of faith into "positive thinking" and "cheering up." And I think of Job. There is a long and deep tradition of faithful people crying out in lament, feeling far from God, asking difficult questions, and refusing to accept platitudes and easy answers. On a sermon preparation podcast I listen to, *Pulpit Fiction*, pastors Eric Fistler and Robb McCoy note that lamentation is, ultimately, an act of hope. When faithful people lift up our complaints and our sorrows and cry out to God for relief, there is an underlying faith – that somehow, someday, relief might come. That a good God is listening. That balance can be restored, pain can be soothed, wounds can be healed. The act of lament is an act of faith and hope.

There is much to lament in these days. We as a nation are still losing almost two thousand people to Covid-19 every day – although we seem to have crested this particular wave a couple of weeks ago. I saw this week a sad story in the news reporting statistics about how many children have lost a parent to the pandemic, and how disproportionately communities of color are impacted – at this point, 1 out of every 170 American Indian and Native Alaskan children have lost a parent to Covid-19 – and it hit me again how the enduring impacts of these last eighteen months are not going to go away in my lifetime. Living through a pandemic is a trauma, and we will all be indelibly impacted by it, just as people have been by generation-defining events throughout history – 9/11, the Vietnam War, the Great Depression, and so on. There are things to give thanks for – for human ingenuity, for the good work of communities who have come

together to mitigate the impact of this virus, for the path we're on toward ending the pandemic – but there is also much to lament. And we don't do justice to the richness of our faith if we insist on always “thinking positive” and “looking on the bright side.” On the cross, Jesus quoted the Psalms: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus knew the scriptural tradition of lament, and used it to give voice to his deep suffering.

Chirpy self-help gurus might try to lecture us about bright sides and silver linings and the power of positive thinking, but scripture offers us a broader range of options to the sorrows of life. We can join our voices with the generations who have cried out their laments to God – and know that we are in the company of Job, and of Jesus, and of so many who have been bold to stand before God with broken hearts and bitter complaints, and trust that God is strong enough to bear our weightiest sorrows.

So, brothers and sisters in faith, may we have the courage to be honest with God, with each other, and with ourselves. And may we have the strength to bear each other's burdens, as well. To hear each other's laments and respond with empathy and support. May we know, that even when God feels far away, we are never alone.

Amen.