

Oct 24, 2021
South Church
Job 42:1-6, 10-17

Gratitude Leads Us Home

Prayer: We thank you that in the life of Jesus our brother, our prophet and savior, you have extended a welcome to us and have built a home with people among whom you live. We thank you that you have called us and that we belong to you. We come to reflect upon your word now, longing to know the touch of your Spirit that we may be encouraged to find our place in your love, our spiritual home...

If you missed last Sunday which was laity Sunday, you missed a great service which lifted many voices from this congregation. Elise Schreier gave an inspired sermon in which she shared her own personal story, and she ended with these words: there is "no promise that you will be protected from pain, you will be protected through pain." She got me in that sermon, it caused me to reflect on some of the most difficult moments in my life, and to reconsider those difficult times, moments I'd prefer to just move on from, because she is right, the person I became afterwards is informed, formed even, by those moments. And they have value to me because they continue to shape me.

You'll have your own moments of course. Listening to Elise, I reflected on... a friend's betrayal, a health crisis, the unexpected death of my father 24 years ago this week; seasons when I faced off privately with God in prayer -- not okay! Not feeling successful. Elise is right, those crucibles are what formed me and shapes who I am, and the choices I make now, the way I show up in the world.

A year and a half of pandemic; divisive politics; trying to live our lives to the best of our abilities under a layer of changing Covid-19 protocols, new advice on booster shots this week, last week new protocols for immunocompromised people. The simplest things are complicated, now. More people are grieving in the US today than any other era, we've lost so many. As we gather this morning, we're not through it, but we are coming through it. None of us has escaped the effects of the pandemic. Who will we be after we have lived through this? How will it have changed us? Yes, there have been silver linings, but there have been losses. Losses which we share and losses which are harder to share and even to quantify. We've missed doing things, some of them important, some of them harder to say what would have happened if it had never happened... It's not at the level of suffering as we read in the book of Job, but there are parallels.

The book of Job is written as a kind of parable. There wasn't a man named Job, except there have been many... this is fiction that is about something real. When my parents wanted to get my attention when I was little they would stop and tell me a story: "once upon a time there was a little girl named Erica," and I knew the story was not about me, "once upon a time..." but it was about me -- "Erica." They were highlighting my moral choices for me.

The book of Job begins with the Hebrew equivalent of "Once upon a time...in the land of Uz..." Which in English is a way of signaling that you're about to tell a story, a folk tale. Job is the original parable, which Jesus would have read, and inspired his own teaching in parables.

For 38 chapters Job suffers and questions God to know why he is beset with the worst life has to offer: illness, loss of income, the death of his family, the useless and ridiculous counsel of his friends who are no help at all.

In chapter 38 God begins an answer that goes on for four chapters and culminates in our reading this morning where Job comes home again and all is restored: health, family, home, and even livestock (14,000 sheep, 6000 camels, 1000 yoke of oxen -- which would be 2000 oxen if they are just yoked by twos, and 1000 donkeys). This is a Biblical way of saying that Job was blessed with wealth, resources, means, and a family, again. A home. It comes full circle with the beginning, only there's even more at the end. Not just daughters now, but the most beautiful daughters in all the land... which every parent knows in their heart, are their own.

Most of the book of Job is this in-between time, the time when Job is suffering. And Job does not have insight into how his own story will turn out, or how to think about his own suffering. We read: "Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: 'who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me...Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and cause the dawn to know its place...Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Do you observe the calving of the deer? ...Is the wild ox willing to serve you? Will it spend the night at your crib? Do you give the horse its might? ...Behold the hippopotamus, which I made as I made you. Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up and makes its nest on high? And the Lord said to Job: (this is my favorite part) shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty?"

I have learned how to encounter pain and loss, from the people with whom I minister. I see you. I see what you are up to in the world. Moving among churches as I do as an interim minister, I have met remarkable, ordinary people, living lives of tremendous faith; in all circumstances. People who make a home for one another, in church.

Elise is right when she offered her life hack: when you're facing the worst, "turn towards each other" she said. This is where I believe deeply that churches are in many ways a best kept secret in our culture right now -- where else can you become a part of an intergenerational community, become known, and even loved, by a community that shares your values. Where else will you encounter an array of people beyond your own household who share your values and can become like family to you? This is a safe space to learn from others, and to challenge others. A place to try out ideas, attempt great things. A place to give and to receive... and this is true of all of us, the infants and the elders, the teenagers and the young professionals: those who have succeeded and those who are failing.

It will not be *fear* of the pandemic that leads us to our spiritual home, it will not be fear, or loss, or destruction, but these things are part of our lives now, it will be gratitude for one another, for God, for the opportunity to be church to one another. For certainly you have

learned in these last months that while the church is not the building, it is a blessing to be here in one another's presence. And to be able to join online. A blessing to hold space in this community for the work of the Spirit.

This is the gratitude that leads us home. And on this pledge Sunday, when you are pledging your support for the coming year, I'd like to welcome each of you home. You are making a home for one another. Gratitude leads us home.

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Congregational Church in South Glastonbury