



First United Church of Oak Park

On Empty

Job 23: 2-17

The Rev. Lydia Mulkey

October 10, 2021

Many of us are currently on empty. I don't mean your car; I mean your spirit. The vessel that is your life, once overflowing with energy and joy, is emptied and dry. Constant shifts in the pandemic have you overwhelmed, confused, and over it! A year and a half with less face-to-face interaction has you extroverts completely drained and you're desperate. So many of you have either been ill with COVID or have had family members and friends suffer and even die with COVID. Some of you have had a series of losses in your family not even related to COVID, but the inability to gather and grieve has compounded your feeling of emptiness. So many of us are on empty. So we come to church, we try to pray, we try a new self-care routine, we take up a mantra, we stretch more, we scroll away an hour, we call a friend for small talk. Still ... empty. What are we doing wrong?

Even if you've never been to church a day in your life, you probably know the name Job. You've at least heard the phrase "the patience of Job." If you know the story like the back of your hand, excuse me while I catch the rest of us up for just a moment. ... Job was an honest and upright citizen. He was good to everyone in the community. He helped those in need. He volunteered for Beyond Hunger, CROP Walk, and he volunteered at his kids' school. He served as a caring and compassionate deacon, and he always fulfilled his pledge with a little extra in the plate at Christmas. He was well loved and respected.

But then, everything began to fall apart for Job. A storm came through and tore his house apart with his children inside. The children didn't survive. Then, Job himself became ill. It was an unbelievable amount of suffering for one person to endure. People had to wonder, what happened? He seemed to have it all together. Something seems fishy.

Job's friends hear about all this and come to sit with him in his grief. He was clearly suffering, so they didn't say anything for a week, but then when Job's grief turned into him cursing the day he was born, they had to say something. His

friend Eliphaz says, “Hey, you’re supposed to be stronger than this. You’re not supposed to talk like that. Chin up.” Job says, “Hey! I’ve got a right to complain here. Look at my life right now!” Well, now his friend Bildad can’t stay quiet anymore. “Hey, Job, this happened for a reason. You have to stop talking like this. Turn to God, and if you’re good with God, God will help you.” Job says, “Look, that’s not how it works. God is beyond anything we can understand. God does what God wants. I, on the other hand, am in the pit of emptiness and despair and there’s nothing I can do.” By this time his friend Zohar has heard enough. “Job, you think you’re such a know-it-all, don’t you? Well, listen, you don’t know everything. You’re not perfect. Who would God be if God let you talk like this and didn’t punish you? You deserve worse than what’s happened to you. You’re lucky things are only this bad!” Job says, “Look, I know I’m not perfect, but I’m no worse than any of you!” His friends keep trying, but Job keeps saying, “Hey! I get to be upset about this! This is not fair! I hate this! God won’t listen to me! God won’t show up! I keep asking and I get no answer. This is unbearable!” In Chapter 7 Job says, “I am allotted months of emptiness. ...” Maybe you can relate.

In the end, God says that Job’s friends were full of it, and that only Job, in his complaining and lamenting, was right. Job, the one who did not try to explain away all the bad things happening to him, but who just yelled and cried his authentic lament, who told God about his emptiness, he was the one who spoke rightly.

Walter Brueggemann talks about the meaning of lament in our relationship with God, saying, “[The] absence of lament is the loss of genuine covenant interaction because the second party to the covenant (the petitioner) has become voiceless or has a voice that is permitted to speak only praise. ... Since such a celebrative, consenting silence does not square with reality, covenant minus lament is finally a practice of denial, cover-up, and pretense. ...”

God doesn’t want a cover-up. If our lives are falling apart and we say things like, “God is in control,” “Everything happens for a reason” or “God won’t give me more than I can handle,” instead of things like, “How long, O God?” or “Why have you forsaken me?” we are not better people with a better outlook on life, we are just better liars. We are just trying to deceive God, and that never works. “How long, O God?” and “Why have you forsaken me?” are, by the way, the most biblical responses you can have to suffering!

Now, there's nothing wrong with being happy, of course. There's nothing wrong with hoping for the best, having good days, celebrating small victories ... all of that is important. But if we can't lament sometimes, if we can't tell God and ourselves the truth when we are hurting, if we are going to come before our great God in denial, we might as well cover up our dry vessel to hide its emptiness before holding it up to the very fountain of life. I don't think I need to explain to you that a vessel that remains covered up cannot be filled and will remain empty.

As a symbol of your willingness to come before God authentically with your laments, I invite you to hold up your open and uncovered hands. Take a moment now to show God how you *truly* are, so that God can start to fill any emptiness she finds and, in time, just as it happened for Job, bring you back to the fullness of life.

(Time of silence)

May your honest lament, your truth telling, be honored by the God who hears you. May the fountain of life overflow into your emptiness and fill you once again. Amen.