

Job 33:12-14

June 10, 2018

Willoughby Heights CanRC

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Read: Job 32:1-33:22

Text: Job 33:12-14

Psalm 30:3,4

Amen-song: Psalm 4:2

Dear children of God, brothers and sisters in Christ, and guests, four men have deeply debated the horrendous circumstances in which Job found himself. Once the richest man, now the poorest. Once dearly loved, now despised by all. Once healthy and fit, now a stinking body covered with open sores. Once living in a palace, now living on the dump. Horrendous circumstances.

How come?

Job has no clue. He hasn't done anything wrong. He hasn't done anything to deserve this. He can't think of a reason why God might do this to him. He'd love to hear God explain Himself. But God, God cloaks Himself in silence.

How come?

Job's three friends figured they knew. Eliphaz. Bildad. Zophar. They knew. God punishes godless people with misery and blesses righteous people with goodness. If you meet up with misery, you must be a godless person. And the worse the misery, the more godless you must be. As Job has gone from the highest to the lowest, he must be the most godless man on earth.

The debate began subtly but heated up until sparks flew. Then the three friends fall silent, the third round of the debate isn't even finished. The debate had gone nowhere. The dialogue had proven to consist of a series of monologues. How true to life, also today. How often don't dialogues dissolve into monologues, where people are not really listening to each other, learning from each other. It's like that in our parliaments, it's like that in the newspapers, it's like that... it can be like that in church too.

It's frustrating when you see this happen, downright frustrating when you read, listen in, observe.

Job 32 tells us there was a fourth friend. A younger man, Elihu. This suggests that the debate between Job and his three friends did not happen behind closed doors. That would have been hard to do anyway. Job lived on the dump, right by the city gate. Job had been a celebrity. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar weren't nobodies either. It makes sense to picture a whole group of people following the debate as it took place. Indeed, we have a written record of the debate. An account in the way the Holy Spirit wanted future generations of people to read it. Were there people taking notes?

There's a fourth friend. "I gave you my attention," he says (Job 32:12a). And now that all have fallen silent, Elihu decides to speak. He was angry, as the three men had nothing more to say. While, so Elihu thought, there was something that should yet be said.

In *his* response, Elihu took a different approach. He didn't ponder the cause of Job's misery. Instead he focussed attention on what happened during the debate. Something that has gone unnoticed, it would seem. Something that relates directly to the very last attack of Satan on Job. Remember, not only had Satan robbed Job of all God's gracious blessings, including his wife and his health. But things remained thus. The question had become: would Job's faith stand the test of time, a time of misery? Job is stumbling, is running the risk of falling away. He may well lose his faith in God. For he has called God to account, repeatedly. And God continued to cloak Himself in silence.

How will Job react to God's silence?

We listen to the Word of God with this theme: Realize that God's response comes when and as He sovereignly decides. We will consider (1) God gives Job an empathetic friend; (2) God has Job corrected by this friend; and (3) God has Job instructed by this friend.

1) God gives Job an empathetic friend.

I once attended a memorial gathering for a young child. It was for a young boy who died by drowning in a swimming pool in Sentani, in the mission field of the Indonesian province Papua. The father of the boy, Rev. Van de Beek was a missionary then. At this memorial gathering, it was in Holland, Rev. Van de Beek was standing in the front of the church with his two oldest children, not all that old. He asked them: "We're in a church building. What is that, a church?" "God's house," one of the children said. Rev. Van de Beek then asked, "So where *is* God?" The children did not know. Rev. Van de Beek: "Look into the eyes of all the people here. Look. That's where you see God. That's where you see God's love, His empathy."

Look into the eyes of the people here in church, and you see God.

Job and his friends ran stuck. In Job 32 they aren't even called friends anymore. "These three men." Job's best friends are no more than "these three men". Not worthy of a name. They've run out of words.

Job has as well. He responded to Bildad. And when Zophar did not speak, Job continued his discourse (Job 27:1). Even a second time (Job 29:1). But Job is done speaking too. He's waiting for God to respond. For God to explain and to comfort. But God doesn't come.

God doesn't come? He does. He came in a fourth friend of Job. Elihu. Wonderful name. El – I – hu. Boys and girls, El=God, i=my, hu=He. "My God is He". His father had a noteworthy name too. Barachel. There's "El" again: God. And "Barach" is the verb "to bless". "May God bless." Job's fourth friend: "My God is He", the son of "May God bless".

The very names of this fourth friend had a message for Job. Job will persevere in faith, the confession of faith will stand. For "My God is *He*" is that confession. And one may call on this God, be assured of His good will. "May God bless."

There are scholars who figure that the names of this fourth friend are so contrived, he never existed. Or that he wasn't a real person, but an angel, sent by God. But that's not the way the account presents him. Scripture describes him as a young man with a father, a family, and a place he came from. He was Elihu son of Barachel, of the family of Ram, originally from Buz. He was as much a real human being as Job and the other three.

This Elihu was younger than the others, much younger. He was so young, that he was still identified by his father's name. Elihu himself said that he, out of respect for the age of Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, had kept silent. Wisdom comes with experience, and to be experienced you need to have some age to you. Elihu had come to listen and learn something from the life experience of his four much older friends.

But this time round, Elihu was disappointed. The debate frustrated him, it had made him angry, especially when it stopped dead in its tracks. Job would not be moved; the three men would not be moved. And thus, the words stop. The exchange of opinions had not been a dialogue but a series of monologues. Elihu realized, this won't get anyone anywhere.

And so, when all fall silent, Elihu jumped into the fray. Not quite according to the rules of decorum. It wasn't really proper. But if the seniors can't say anything that makes sense, the younger ones have to speak up. And Elihu, like any young person about to say something in an important discussion, is eager to speak. He is getting frustrated. His heart is throbbing in his throat. He feels like a bottle of champagne, all shaken up, about to burst open.

Picture Job, brothers and sisters, as Elihu spoke. What would Job have thought? Oh no, here's another one of those so-called friends? Or was Job eager to hear: Will Elihu provide a way out?

The first words Elihu spoke may have put Job at ease. Elihu said he'd bring something new into the discussion. He also wanted to be impartial. He wasn't going to choose sides. And after a long run-up, certainly long for westerners like most of us, Elihu got to the meat of the matter. It begins with Job 33:1. There's a difference right there. Elihu was the first one to refer to Job by his name. It's a noteworthy detail.

For the other three men never addressed Job by name. Nor did Job ever refer to his friends by name. Mentioning a person's name adds a sense of urgency to what you are about to say. It also makes the discussion more personal. Here indeed is an empathic friend, one who tried to understand what Job was going through, one who wanted to stand next to him, offer his shoulder as support. God gave Job an empathetic friend.

Look into the eyes of the people here in church, and you see God. Sometimes congregational members tell how they feel lonely and forgotten. God seems to have forgotten them. The church doesn't look them up. Yet, that's not true. God does not forget you. By the mouth of Isaiah God once said "Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, 'My way is hidden from the LORD; my right is disregarded by my God'? ... [God] gives power to the faint and to him who has no might he increases strength." (Isaiah 40:27 & 29). The problem is not that God does not care. The problem is, as Elihu articulated it and we find it in our text, "For God speaks in one way, and in two, though man does not perceive it." Office-bearers have the difficult task of pointing this out to disappointed and frustrated members of the congregation. "What about all the cards? All the visits?" I've had it happen the response was: "But those are from my family, my friends." True. But that family and those friends are also the church. Look around, how many people who do not belong to God's church also go through life without true friends and true family. And the visit by a minister, an elder, a deacon. "The office bearer comes as one appointed by the church to visit on behalf of the church." As Elihu points out, in the depths of misery people can be blind to the help that God is granting.

Look into the eyes of the people here in church, and you see God. That's true. For people have been called to mirror God, to be God's image. And people in the church are being recreated in the image of God.

Elihu was such a church member. Elihu, "My God is He", was an empathetic friend given by God to Job. A brother in the faith who offered true comfort, encouragement, and admonition.

Elihu, his very name reminded Job of his faith. "My God is He."

2. Having noted the significance of Elihu's presence, let's now pay attention to what he said. Our second consideration is that God has Job corrected by Elihu.

What should one think of the words of Elihu?

We know what to think of the words of Job and of the three friends. For God has informed us of His thoughts on that. Job had spoken correctly of Him, the three friends had not. At best, the words of the three friends are one-sided. And sometimes, especially in relation to Job, they are outright lies.

But Elihu appears and disappears without any comments being made. When the discussion fell silent, it turns out that there is yet a fourth friend. And when God spoke—some commentators even say God interrupts Elihu—the fourth friend fell silent too. His name is not mentioned in the closing chapter of Job.

There is one hint in the book of Job though, that tells us to think positively of Elihu's words. That tells us they are not like the words of the other three friends. Elihu asked Job to respond to Elihu's words. But Job does not. Job remained silent. And Elihu seems to have considered Job's silence an encouragement to continue speaking. Job 34: And Elihu answered and said. Job 35: And Elihu answered and said. Job 36: And Elihu continued, and said. This suggests that Job considered it worthwhile to listen what "My God is He" wanted to say. Did Job hear the voice of God in the youthful voice that admonished and encouraged him? This view is supported by the fact that at no time does God condemn Elihu for speaking as he did. And the fact that some of Elihu's words are quoted in the New Testament as being truthful – part of the doxology found in Romans 11 comes from Elihu.

There's something else. Elihu does not speak about the why of Job's suffering. Job and his friends had debated that matter. In fact, Job was struggling with two matters that seemed irreconcilable. On the one hand there is his faith in God's justice. God is fair. God blesses the upright and God punishes the godless.

On the other hand there is the reality of Job's suffering. Job hasn't done anything wrong, and yet life is tough for him. It's not that Job never sins. True, Elihu claims to quote Job as saying: "I am pure, without transgression, I am clean, and there is no iniquity in me." (33:9) It's not quite what Job said. And Job was aware that he was not perfect. However, Job is not a man who lives in guilt. There's a difference between "committing sins" and "living in sin". And Job was not living in sin.

On the one hand God's righteousness, on the other hand Job's suffering. For Job, those two together don't make sense. His friends claim they indeed don't go together, so either God is not righteous or Job is a sinner. God is obviously righteous, hence, Job must be a sinner. Job protests, for it's not true. But what then is the answer?

That's why Job kept turning to God for a response. Job was convinced God would be on his side, and thus, whenever God would speak, Job's name would be vindicated. It is one of the highpoints in the book of Job, his confession that his Redeemer lives and that, in the end, all will be good. But, but God isn't saying anything. As Elihu put it, verse 13, "Why do you contend against Him, saying "He will answer none of man's words?" Or translated as the footnote in the ESV suggests, "He will not answer for any of His own words."

God's silence, that had become Job's problem. Job wants vindication. Job wants justification. Job wants to understand why things are the way they are.

And that's the matter Elihu addressed. He's not going to tackle the difficult "why" of suffering. He stays closer to home, and wants to consider how a person should undergo suffering.

Thus God has Elihu correct Job. In this way:

"God is greater than man." "Man". The original Hebrew text here has the word "Enosh". "Enosh" is the name given to the third generation from Adam. The word points to the fragility of human life. One might use the word "mortal" here.

A person who is greater will not be led by one who is less. A more important person won't let himself be told what to do by one who is less. Children don't tell parents what to do. Students don't tell teachers what to do. It is the more important person who calls the shots. And thus, Job might very well be angry at God, but that's not right. Job is not right when he thinks that God owes him an explanation. People cannot call God to account.

We live in a time of individualism and independence. Hence, what Elihu said may be extra difficult for us to swallow. We're accustomed to forcing powers and authorities to be accountable. For example, people figure enough protests will put an end to the Trans Mountain Pipeline project. But it doesn't work for God. God does not owe us people anything. We're all people who have been pinched from clay (33:6). We are the clay and God is the potter.

Elihu did not know whether Job has sinned or not. But this Elihu knew: If Job continues to call God to account, he *will* be sinning. If he persists in calling God to account, Job will not only have committed sin, he will be "living in sin". For continuing to question God becomes an expression of not trusting in God.

And then there was a second matter. Job had become so frustrated with his situation that he had become disappointed in God and angry with God. God was no longer just his friend, his redeemer and saviour. God had also become his opponent, his enemy. Elihu noted, Job, if you keep feeding this frustration, you will lose your faith in God. And that's not good. Job's frustration is not only fed by "why is God doing this to me?" but also by "why isn't God telling me?" And with that second matter, Job was looking for something he should not seek.

Our Lord Jesus Christ once said "Ask, and it will be given to you." But that doesn't mean that whatever you ask, you will receive. James noted: "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions." (James 4:3). That was becoming Job's problem. Job was so full of his own situation and so frustrated with the lack of empathy coming from his friends, that he was losing sight of God's affairs. There's nothing wrong with complaining to God. We saw that when we looked at Job 3 and Job 10. And

God is understanding when it comes to us being frustrated with God, ever angry with God. But brothers and sisters, never forget who you are. We are mere mortals and God is God. Never step beyond your bounds. A complaint, frustration, and anger should not turn you away from God and cause you to hate God.

That is the correction of Elihu, that's Elihu's rebuke. "Job, realize that God doesn't owe you an explanation. Don't get mad because God is not responding. And don't keep asking for a response."

Elihu was right. For this is the very sin from which Job later repents (Job 42:1-6). A repentance that already began with the fact that Job did not respond to Elihu, did not argue with him, but let him speak on and on and on.

There was wisdom in the words of that young friend, Elihu, that young friend "My God is He."

3) Elihu corrected Job. But that's not all he did. He also instructed Job. We hear, in the third place, how God has Job instructed by Elihu.

One of Job's frustrations was: God isn't saying anything. Elihu said: Be careful Job, you as a mortal pinched from clay cannot call God to account.

Elihu also added this. Job, is it true that God has indeed cloaked Himself in total silence. Man cannot force God to speak. But that doesn't mean God never speaks. The problem may well be that man does not *hear* the speaking of God. God is speaking but you're so self-absorbed that you don't recognize the voice of God.

Elihu tells of two ways in which God speaks.

The first is the way of visions and dreams. When you are asleep, you can have experiences which have implications for life when you're awake. Even today we don't quite know how it works. But we do know that when a person sleeps, their brain continues to be active doing what in computer terms might be called "background tasks". God can use this as a means to communicate with people. Especially the days of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were known for this. Think of Jacob's dream in Bethel. Think of the dreams of Joseph, of the butler and the baker, of the Pharaoh. Elihu tells how dreams can be God's way of warning you against wrongdoing. In dreams people often find themselves doing things they'd like to do in real life, but don't do. In dreams you may find out why.

The second way Elihu noted is that of suffering. With this, Elihu touches a very sensitive issue. For Job is sick, horribly sick. The suffering of a sick-bed may be used by God to put you straight, to protect you from pride. For sickness confronts you with weakness and limitations. You come to realize how much you need others. You also come to realize how much you detest this dependence on others. People, church people, tend to like to help others, but have a dislike for being helped by others. People will say: "I don't like asking for help."

Our text says, "God speaks in one way and in two."

There's a hint of this verse in the opening words of Hebrews 1: "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets."

We today would add a third, we happen to be further along in the history of revelation. We'd point to the Bible, to God's Word. That too is a speaking of God to man. It is a form of speaking that has superseded the manner of communication through dreams. Don't misunderstand me: God can still communicate with individual people through dreams.¹ But such dreams are always very personal. And whatever we may be told, it will always be in agreement with what Scripture tells us. That's why we as Christians don't buy the

¹ It is a common occurrence on the mission field. See, for example, D.K. Wielenga, *De Oude Van Dagen*, which relates the story of mission work in Indonesia.

dreams Mohammed had, or Joseph Smith. As Hebrews 1 continues to say: “but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son.” It is the Bible which brings us the words of God’s Son, and thus Scripture is the spoken Word of God that today serves as touchstone for all things, also for our dreams. And, no less, for our suffering.

But, going back to the time of our text, Job and Elihu did not have such a written Word of God. Yes, there may have been some writings. And there certainly was an oral tradition. It’s interesting to note how Elihu uses an expression also found in Genesis 2: “I too was pinched off from a piece of clay.” But those writings were few, God’s providence had not yet led the history of revelation to be collected in a book. And thus Elihu speaks of dreams and of suffering.

Job was looking for a message from God. Such a message, Elihu pointed out, may come in a vision of the night or through illness.

Now you’d think that Elihu would now continue to speak of the message that God intended or may have intended with the suffering of Job. But he did not. That’s not where he wanted to go. He’d seen how Job and the other three friends had run stuck in that discussion. Elihu focussed simply on the fact that Job did not realize his suffering may have the very message from God he is looking for.

And we know today Elihu was dead on. For *we* know what *Elihu* did not know. We have knowledge of Job 1 and 2, of the confrontation between God and Satan. We know that the message of Job indeed lies in his suffering, or even deeper yet, in how Job reacts to his suffering. The message of Job is that the just shall live by faith, that the children of God persevere in faith, that faith, God’s gift worked by God’s Spirit, is able to withstand whatever the devil may throw at it. Two thousand years later, maybe even more, James would articulate it as follows: “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (James 1:2-4). That’s how his letter begins. And later on he wrote: “Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast [in suffering]. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job,” (James 5:11). Elihu is right, dead on: there’s a message in the suffering of Job. That’s his instruction.

Realize, beloved, God’s response comes when and as He sovereignly decides. We’ve seen how this was for Job. It’s as true for us today. And it’s true for the bigger picture, the picture of world history. Many longed to see the day of Christ, but the Lord was often silent. God is sovereign. He determines when the time is right. The day of the Christ came, when the time was full. When God’s moment had arrived.

We need to learn to be patient. In the big picture of things. Just as Israel longed for the coming of Messiah, so we long for the return of the Christ. No more illness, no more crying, no more frustration, no more death, no more sin. Why doesn’t that day come more quickly? But we will bide God’s time.

And in the smaller things too. God’s providence implies patience in adversity (LD 10). That’s what God had Elihu point out to Job. There is a time to be angry, to be frustrated, to give voice to a complaint. We learned that with Job 10. But one should not cherish such bitterness of soul. The challenge is to rise above the anger and frustration, and come to rest in God through Christ. And that is possible. Hear the apostle Paul, who knew much suffering, cry “Nothing will separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 8:39).

It’s ironic when you think about it. Satan had challenged God that Job’s faith was fake, it wouldn’t stand the test of seemingly endless trials. But God uses the trials that faith undergoes to strengthen faith.

And thus, dear brothers and sisters, whatever your pain is in life, look to Christ, look to God, await God’s time. Listen for God, listen to God.

And continue in faith. For the just ... shall live ... by faith
Amen.