



DIALOGUE SERMON “RIFTS AND SHIFTS”
SCRIPTURE: JOB 1:1, 2: 1-10; HEBREWS 1:1-4, 2:5-12
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
Sunday, October 3, 2021

Marcia Mount Shoop, Richard Coble, Amy Kim Kyremes-Parks, Preaching

(MMS, RRC, and AKKP come out and set up their stools. Each has a bag of fun party stuff)

MMS: (kind half-heartedly) Hey Richard and Amy Kim, can you believe it! The day is finally here, GCPC Palooza 2021! Yay!!!!

RRC: Yeah, the day is here alright. And it’s so good to see the people who are here and know that so many others are joining us online. But, I’ll be honest I am kinda having trouble getting into a Palooza frame of mind.

AKKP: Well this is my first GCPC Palooza--so I have nothing to compare it to--but I get the feeling this is supposed to be a big celebration, right?!

MMS: Yes, it’s a celebration of the GCPC community and all of the blessings and gifts of our life together! Here, maybe this will get us in the Palooza spirit.

(MMS gives out pizza hats to AKKP, RRC, WJJ and MMS).

MMS: Remember Palooza 2017 when the caterer didn’t show up so we ordered a bunch of pizzas right here!

RRC: Yes, Marcia, I do remember that. My first Palooza!!! (pause) Actually, it was really stressful.

AKKP: This is just making me hungry for pizza.

(Tim Moe play waa, waa, waa)

RRC: I have an idea. Try these on for size!

(RRC gives out blue wigs to Jeff, Marcia, AKKP, Micah, and Bill Neeriemer).

AKKP: Ok these are really cool, but what does blue hair have to do with Palooza?

MMS: You know how GCPC is--we do things with a lot of laughter and creativity. The staff actually wore these blue wigs one Palooza and danced to Shout! In front of the whole congregation down in the Atrium.

RRC: It was pretty crazy. We **also** used these wigs to invite people to get involved in the JOY group--Just Older Youth.

MMS: I remember that! “At Grace Covenant, Blue Hair Ain’t What it Used to Be!”

(MMS, RRC, and AKKP try to smile and act like it is fun to have the wigs on; then get a forlorn look on their faces)

AKKP: Do we really have to wear these wigs all day??

(Tim Moe plays waa, waa, waa again)

MMS: You know what you guys, we need a fresh COVID-informed way to celebrate-- something that transcends ages, contexts, experiences and how long you’ve been at GCPC! Something that takes into account the reality of the world we live in and the reality that we need a way to be together and celebrate each other.

RRC: Yes! That’s what we need! (pausing for a minute while we all think)

RRC: But, what in the world could that be?

[Jeff plays Jeopardy theme]

AKKP: Yes, what could it be?? (with a sly and knowing look on her face)

AKKP: You’re gonna love it! Nose whistles!

RRC and MMS: Nose whistles?

MMS: What in the world are nose whistles?

(AKKP gets out the nose whistles and shows us how to use them)

AKKP: These things are always a hit at any party!!

(MMS and RRC try them)

MMS: I don’t know Amy Kim, these are great and all. But it just feels like things are more complicated now--like it’s not so easy to “forget our troubles and just get happy.” And remember--the scripture passage is from Job. I mean, Job! That’s about as party pooper as you can get in the church world.

RRC: Well there’s always the passage from Hebrews. It’s an inspirational speaker telling people to keep their chin up in difficult times.

MMS: True, Richard. AND it’s the suffering of Jesus that the Hebrews sermon is really focused on. Another really hard conversation about a really hard topic.

(Tim Moe plays waa, waa, waa again on the trombone)

AKKP: So how do we celebrate in a world where suffering is present all the time, and so much a part of what our faith tells us we need to pay attention to and be honest about all the time!

(RRC in the center. Hebrews right, Job left as you are facing the parking lot)

MMS: A reading from the Book of Job. Listen for the word of God.
There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.

AKKP: A reading from the Book of Hebrews. Listen for the word of God.
Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets.

MMS: One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the LORD. The LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. Job still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason."

AKKP: Someone has testified somewhere, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them? You have made them for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honor, subjecting all things under their feet."

RRC: [stand up] Job and Hebrews - they both proclaim God's presence, not in spite of, but exactly in the midst of suffering.

Some people can talk to a brick wall. And many others find it easy to talk with strangers; making small and big talk come naturally to them. Perhaps, that is true for you; perhaps it is true for the people I am sharing this sermon with. It is not true for me. Though you've recently seen me dancing up on the chancel, in conversations I can be reserved, guarded, maybe even sometimes awkward. I've learned how to live this personality in a pastoral way through the years, but that's taken some time.

A decade ago, back when I was in seminary completing a hospital chaplaincy internship in New Brunswick, NJ, I was having trouble introducing myself to new patients. I found it difficult to walk in unannounced to a patient's room, asking how they are feeling in the midst of dire physical challenges, like I was intruding on something individual and intimate, like I was imposing myself.

(easel white board)

My supervisor this gruff New Jerseyian named John. I brought this difficulty to him, and he answered with a rather poorly drawn series of stick figures, one in a hospital bed, and one

walking into their room. 'Who is that?' he asked, pointing at the one in the bed. 'The patient,' I answered. 'Yes, and what do they want?' he asked. 'I don't know?' I responded.

'They want someone to listen to them. Medical staff come in and out all day but they usually want something, they need to change a bandage, give a medication, look at a wound, adjust a drip. They're rushed and pulled too thin. Most don't have time to talk, much less to listen. The patient wants someone to listen to them.'

'Who's that,' he asked, pointing at the other stick figure. 'The chaplain.' 'The chaplain,' he answered. 'And who is the chaplain?' I listed off some answers, 'A student; an employee of the hospital; a stranger.' The supervisor said, 'Yes, and?' I stared back blankly. 'The chaplain represents what?' I kept staring back blankly. The supervisor clearly wanted me to read his mind; I wasn't in the mood to be corrected.

'The chaplain represents the divine, or the faith community, or the reality that people still care, people still have time to listen to one another. The chaplain reminds the patient that people still see them as a person.'

Then, my supervisor made a series of wavy lines all over the page. 'And this is God. God is in that room. God is there whether the patient knows it or not. And the chaplain, when you walk in that room, when you stop and spend some minutes out of your day to listen, when you stop and pray, you are a reminder that God is in that room. That God is in that patient's life. That that patient is not alone.'

I think of that conversation often today, because the church plays that same role. It's not a social club; it's not a school; what we are doing right now is not entertainment; and palooza afterward is not just a block party. The church is a reminder of God's presence in the midst of this community, an extension of God's love and care, God's hands in a suffering world.

(MMS & AKKP join RRC standing)

MMS: Yes, Richard! I often say that is exactly what drew me to work in the church - because it is a place where we really believe something, and proclaim something, and build community around that faith!

AKKP: It's so good to be here, and to be a part of how God is moving here at GCPC. But, you all, what about when the church is not just here (gesturing around). What happens when the church is not a physical presence, or not a presence all in one place.

MMS: Yes, exactly! We've been the church in diaspora for a year and a half now!

RRC: Yes - how does the church embody the presence and love of God in a suffering world, when there's no physical there, there, when the church is a bunch of people gathering around their devices for online worship or a zoom formation class?

MMS: And it's more than that too. There's no denying that these have been hard months. And yes, we've risen to the occasion. Together we have proclaimed God's love and presence week after week, on vmix, on zoom, in front of cameras and before tv screens.

AKKP: We've written cards, come to drive throughs, sent texts, taken walks, provided meals and supported each other. But the church is more than just a love machine! It's also filled with people who are hurting. Life is full of suffering.

(RRC sits on the left, AKKP sits in the middle, MMS, sits on the right)

RRC: Continuing in the book of Job

Then Satan answered the LORD, "Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and Job will curse you to your face."

MMS: Continuing in the book of Hebrews

Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

RRC: The LORD said to Satan, "Very well, Job is in your power; only spare his life." So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.

MMS: It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings.

(AKKP stands)

AKKP: How do we know when people are struggling? Is it a look? Do you ask? Should you ask? Do you look for people sitting by ashes with sores?

Everyone is grieving something. Covid has confirmed this but this has always been the case. Even Job was struggling in the midst of his faithfulness. Job was confronted with forces and struggles that challenged his faith in God's presence.

God uses Job and later Jesus to help us understand that struggle and pain are inevitable. So what do we do with that? Well I believe first we need to make peace with the fact that our questions and doubts are not about being unfaithful. It is part of the process... grief and praise are really two sides of the same coin. You can still hold on to God while you question. It is never an either or proposition. Later on in the story Job continues to lament all while clinging to this faith in the one who gave him everything. The very process of

lamenting was what deepened Job's faith and yet we do not invite it into our lives....to our bodies.

What we need as a community, a nation is to find some ways to help us metabolize and wade through the lament. Now...it is past time.

The practice of lament throughout the Bible and in the culture of the near east is one of sound. There is an engagement of the whole body in the process of grief and of healing. Authors use Crying out to God, calling, physical trembling, pain, separation, suffering, thirst, hunger.... All are full-bodied physical, emotional and spiritually activating. There is sound. Ughhhh, an exacerbated breath, groaning, the ouch, the cursing....it is all there. What can we learn about lament through these scriptures that can move us through this time of lament?

Now, I know there are some of you that may think....that is fine for you but.....that is just not what "we" do.

Western Culture has not allowed for loud and physical expressions of grief and lament. There has been an imposed culture of order and decency that has choked our ability to express our sadness with our whole selves. I say choked because it is that moment...when you start choking and realize that it is not a cough...you are gasping for air and need to get water or something to clear what is blocking your very breath... The absence of active lamenting has us operating as if we are unmoved by the pain of it all- this is a lie.

So, as a community, a nation, what have we done to people who lament? We judge it as weak, as too much, extra, overwhelming and out of control. Many times we cause further trauma because of our inability to recognize suffering and lament for the burden and full body work that it is. You see, those who practice lament, taking the time to metabolize it are what is saving us. The ones who are not afraid to remind us of our humanity, the common thread of life that is both worrisome and wonderful and yet we are still here. We need to work on our own practice of lament while inviting others to do the same.

The rhythm of lament as written in the book of Lamentation is one of actual stumbling but still moving forward. It is written in a rhythm that is not fluid...it has an actual hiccup that is more like walking with an injury. What happens when you see people with an injury? You might pay more attention, you might give them more space, you might offer presence and care. What would it mean for us to really put that to practice, to make space for suffering and lament? Doing this will expand our ability to sit with others in the lament, lament ourselves and carry on together through our shared struggles along the way.

Recently I read a critique of contemporary Christian music. In the top 100 most popular songs in Christian music there was only one that could be characterized as a song of lament. ONE! Western Christianity continues to peddle a faith in God that does not involve questioning, struggle and lament. It emphasizes joy, peace, harmony and love as indicators of the Holy among us and totally discounts the incarnation of Jesus.

The incarnation-Jesus being fully human and fully God is the most riveting example of God's understanding and recognition that suffering is inevitable. Even to the point of sending Jesus, God's son knowing that this meant Jesus would struggle, question and lament. And in Christ's suffering he was made perfect.

(MMS and RC stand to join AKKP)

MMS: Thank you, Amy Kim. Lament is an act of faith. It is a way of staying in relationship to God when we are hurting, and it is a witness to the fact that God stays with us in that suffering. When we try to silence lament, we trivialize our relationship with God.

RRC: And we trivialize God's faithfulness to us. God's willingness to suffer with us and to even take on the suffering of the world is an expression of God's fidelity to humanity.

AKKP: Our faith actually gets strengthened by lament--it is really about trust--trusting our relationship with God and with each other enough to embody the deep sorrow that comes with being human.

MMS: I believe the story of Job and the preacher in the Book of Hebrews both call us to a deeper place still--deeper than presence, deeper than a space to share sorrow. Jesus' solidarity with the human race isn't just about compassion, it's also about redemption.

AKKP: Isn't redemption about freedom and liberation? Not the fourth of July patriotic freedom but the freedom talked about in scripture...the liberation of us all?

RRC: *How can talk* of redemption be meaningful in a way that doesn't discount the suffering that we've been talking about today or whitewash the injustice of this world?

MMS: Exactly! To put it bluntly, what good is God if all the presence and all the compassion don't change the world! And the way we live in the world!

(Go back and sit, AKKP left; RC right)

AKKP: Continuing in the book of Job:
Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die."

RRC: Continuing in the book of Hebrews:
For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father.

AKKP: But Job said to her, "You speak as any **impious person** would speak.

RRC: For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters,

AKKP: Shall we receive the **good** at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?"

RRC: Jesus says, "I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters,

AKKP: In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

RRC: ...in the midst of the congregation I will praise you."

MMS: What is faith if it always requires resolution or a happy ending? Well, I'll be honest, my question is really harder than that one. Do we have faith if faith does NOT guarantee a happy ending to the story of our lives? One of the things that my life has forced me to sit with these last 18 months is that some suffering is not redemptive. Some suffering is irredeemable. That's something I've known for a long time, but sometimes life amplifies things we've already learned.

I reject the "everything happens for a reason" answer to suffering.

Life is complicated--there are no easy answers.

And both the Book of Job and the Book of Hebrews are about dispensing with the easy answer if you truly live the life of faith. Job's friends as the book plays out represent the standard answers to the question: "why is their suffering in the world." The answers range from "you deserve it" to "God is teaching you something" to "everything is just random." And everything in between.

And the Book of Hebrews is written by a preacher. He or she is there to try and rally the troops. The Book of Hebrews is a sermon, a pep talk to a tired people. They are tired of the hard work of faith. They are tired of being so up close and personal to the suffering of the world. The preacher in Hebrews doesn't coddle the people. The preacher doesn't say don't worry, be happy.

The preacher tells those tired people about who Jesus is--a pioneer in the faith--the one who goes before us to show us the way. Jesus shows us the way perfect love navigates the fraught realities of human life.

Love does not avoid suffering or inflict it on others to avoid it for ourselves.

Perfect love is in perfect solidarity with the world's suffering.

The preacher talks theology and christology--the preacher talks about the complexity and intricacy of the way Jesus redeems the world. This preacher is the opposite of a prosperity gospel preacher. The preacher in Hebrews is a truth-teller.

Faith isn't about getting a pass from having to do the hard work of being human. Faith is something far more transformational than a get out of jail free card.

When you drill down to the core of what faith is--it's a choice we make every day before we put our feet on the ground and live another day.

That choice is why I am a minister instead of an academic or a politician or a lawyer. I choose to believe every day that God is real and that my life has divine purpose and that your life has divine purpose. I choose to believe every day that Spirit is moving and breathing in our connections to each other. I choose to believe that working to heal broken relationships is the work that God empowers us to do together.

Every day I choose to believe that there is no easy answer to why there is suffering in the world, but that doesn't mean there is no answer to suffering in the world.

Look around. If you are at home, look around there and look around here.

Let's let our minds sort through all the different reasons we are here the way we are here today.

Notice how your body feels sitting outside being around people in the midst of a continuing global pandemic. Or how your body feels sitting at home or wherever you are. Notice what comes up when you see who is here and who is not here, what you know and what you don't know.

How does it feel to have a critical consciousness about how things like white supremacy and patriarchy and tragedy and grief shape who we are together?

How does it feel to open up your consciousness to resilience and relationship and belief and commitment--and how they shape who we are together?

What does it feel like to sit with both the promises and the pain of our life together?

Sit with the complexity. Let it tell you about you, about us, about church, about God.

The answer to how to live in a world full of suffering is not a trite platitude or a complicated theological formula.

Let your consciousness shift to the present moment, to the way your body feels right now with us together across space, across time.

Breathe into this Holy Shift in our orientation to both the question of suffering and the answer to the suffering.

God calls us to find ways to be together that do not diminish our humanity, but in ways that ennoble our humanity. God made us to regenerate, to heal, to forgive, to create. God made us for relationship and for redemption.

Grace Covenant, community is the answer **to** the suffering of the world.

That is why and how we celebrate today!

We celebrate that we are together, that we are connected, that we are finding our way together by following a God who moved heaven and earth to show us what true solidarity lives like!

RRC: Community is where and how we continue to imagine new ways of living together.

AKKP: Community where and how we find purpose in being honest about our struggles and our gifts.

MMS: Community is where we catch glimpses of God with us and God transforming us. And we feel the affirmation that comes from living life for and with each other.

RRC: So of course we are celebrating today--because we feel God's presence when we are present with each other!

AKKP: And of course we are celebrating, because we are not afraid for our lament to be loud when we are together!

MMS: And of course we are celebrating, because we don't seek after easy answers or theological doctrines to fix all our problems. We are building something together with God's help--a community who loves human beings fiercely enough to have our minds and body's set on the freedom that Jesus tells us is for the whole wide world.

RRC: Maybe this will be our best Palooza yet!

AKKP: It IS the best Palooza because it is happening right now!

MMS: It IS the best Palooza because we're together.

MMS, RRC, AKKP: Thanks be to God.