

“Sowing, Reaping, and The Valley of Stagnation”

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Job 42:1-6, 10-17, Psalm 126, Mark 10: 46-52

Good morning. Let's bow together in prayer. *May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord. Amen.*

At dinner Wednesday night before Chancel Choir rehearsal, Myron Schmidt asked me whether I'll be preaching a message or a sermon. I asked him what the difference was and he said, well a sermon is like “That's it. That's what it is,” and a message you can kind of “play around with.” So, Myron, I guess this is a message. Just wanted to preface.

I do have to credit Lois and Luann for providing such good message fodder with their own sermons these past two weeks. We've been studying Job – arguably one of the most difficult Biblical books to digest and to teach – yes, fortunately, or unfortunately, at my suggestion. Did any of you grow up hearing the phrase “You get what you get and you don't get upset? Or ‘You get what you get and you don't throw a fit?’” Job was a great model of that well-known parenting mantra. He was described as “blameless, upright” (Job 1:8). He was obedient and upstanding. At least for a while. Two weeks ago, Lois spoke on Job Chapter 23 – where Job can't find God; he's *full* of complaints about his circumstances and wants to defend himself and say his piece. He just wants a hearing. God, in this instance, did not play by the rules – the rules of Old Testament retributive justice. Job, seemingly faultless, withstood more catastrophe than even *he* could bear. Luann aptly described it as ‘deconstructive.’ Changing our idea of what structure should look like. Last week we looked at Chapter 38 – what Luann named ‘decentering.’ *God* takes the mic. *God* says ‘I'll ask the questions this time and, Job, you listen.’

That's where we land today, in Job 42, the final chapter and epilogue. Job has repented. He admits that he should've just – as the Message puts it, “shut up and listen[ed].” God has powers and plans that are too marvelous and mysterious for Job to understand. There is wisdom in *not knowing*. Because of Job's faithfulness and understanding, God restores Job's fortune. Job is content because his eyes are opened; he can “see” God's power and knows God's faithfulness in full. Job's livestock and material possessions increase twofold. His offspring flourish. He dies “full of years” (I like that expression – you're not old, you're full of years) and, presumably, wealthy and content. A happy ending. I'm going to continue the pattern of descriptions with the ‘de’ prefix and call this section of Job “decompressing.” It feels as if Job's anger and tension just slowly deflate. Decrease. Return to a ‘normal’ state. God's faithfulness (and Job's faithfulness) prevail! Job listened, Job was trusting, Job understood his human status and the immortal, invisible, benevolent God provided. The end.

I like a short sermon as much as the next person, but I'm not entirely satisfied with concluding there. The epilogue of Job ties a nice bow on the story, but I want to dig deeper into how we got to this point. The bulk of this book finds Job grappling with those hard, existential questions: ‘Why me?’, ‘Why now?’, ‘Where *is* God in all of this?’ Sometimes, we find it true that when it rains, it pours (not literally – in South Central Kansas, anyway). What if we aren't done grappling? Grieving? I'm sure we've all been there at one point or another, and it's hard to find God there or believe that God is good when bad things happen. When I first began crafting this message, I thought about receiving the news of my maternal grandmother's unexpected passing in July. The raw emotion I felt. The confusion. The hurt for my mom and what she must have been feeling. More recently, I've been thinking a lot about an older couple (sorry – ‘full of years’) that are residents at Pine Village, my workplace in Moundridge. Not even a year ago they lost a brother/in-law. A month ago they lost a son-in-law. Their daughter just suffered an TIA (ministroke). Immediately after their son-in-law's funeral

they learned that their 7-year-old great-granddaughter was diagnosed with a rare form of brain cancer that is considered terminal. The parents of that little girl are now also grieving a miscarriage. So, what do we do with that? In times of uncertainty when God turns our world upside-down and we just feel stuck? How do we get to the point where Job is here in Chapter 42? Specifically in verses 1-6; after he repents, *before* his fortune was restored. Full of understanding, remorse and contentment. We'll get back to that.

As you've heard both Lois and Luann mention, Job is one of seven books of the Bible that fall underneath the broader umbrella of Wisdom literature. As you might expect, the genre largely focuses on instruction, especially in the context of human life. They're written for us! Equally predictable is the fact that the majority of the Wisdom books are found in the Old Testament. Job is unique in that it is the exception to the Proverbial wisdom Lois was telling us about two weeks ago – the karma, 'if/then' type. If I do good, I will be rewarded. If I do evil, I will face the consequences. It is, rather, speculative/existential wisdom – or, as Lois put it, not quite as comforting, which is what makes it challenging.

You'll notice I strayed from Job and Mark to add a third scripture this morning – also from the Revised Common Lectionary selections for today and also from what is *sometimes* considered a Wisdom book – Psalm 126, which we read as our Call to Worship this morning. It is clearly Proverbial in nature, and also poetic: “They that sow in tears shall reap in joy” (Psalms 126:5 KJV). Psalm 126, for me, is the connecting strand between the three texts this morning. It tells us, in so many words, that joy and sorrow are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they often walk hand in hand. Psalm 30:5, “Weeping may endure for a night, but *joy* comes in the morning” (NKJV). I wonder if any of you are pondering your own life experiences where this has been the case. If you take away nothing else from the message this morning, take this: God is good, all the time. That used to be what the former pastor at Menno Mennonite Church in Ritzville, WA would open each service with. It

was a responsive ritual. God is good, **all the time**. All the time, **God is good**. Not *only* when good things are happening, but also in the struggle, the unthinkable. This seems like such a contradictory message when we're discussing Job and when we look at the state of our world. Often, that statement brings up those existential questions; the ever mysterious fact that God allows bad things to happen to good people, so how can God be objectively good? In Basic Issues of Faith and Life (BIFL), a required course for seniors at Bethel College, Peter Goerzen introduced us to theodicy (not *The Odyssey*, theodicy): the understanding of the problem of evil as it relates to God's greater plans for the cosmos (the term was coined by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz – German mathematician and philosopher – and comes from the Greek prefix *theo*: God and *dikē* (dee-kay): justice) – basically, it's an attempt to defend God for justifying evil. Phew. What a task. There are innumerable theories on theodicy but one of the most influential thinkers on this concept was Roman Catholic saint and scholar St. Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas actually, in addition to his other, more well-known works, wrote commentaries on five books of the Bible, perhaps the most comprehensive of which was on the book of Job. What I personally find most applicable today is that Aquinas' commentary on Job – basically a theodicy in itself – rides on the foundational understanding that God is omniscient (all-knowing) and omnibenevolent (all-good or all-loving). American philosopher and professor Eleanore Stump writes this in an essay on Aquinas's commentary: "Aquinas...begins with the conviction that neither God's goodness nor his existence are in doubt, either for the characters in the story of Job or for the readers of that story" (57).

I think the 126th Psalm provides a starting point for *us* to understand theodicy and for instruction on how we can be more like Job, Chapter 42 edition. Content, *even though*. I decided to ruminate on the actions of sowing and reaping mentioned in the Psalm this morning, hence the sermon title. There are *so* many verses in the Bible that reference these actions (93, to be exact, and I got that number from the internet so it's definitely correct). One

common example is Galatians Chapter 6:7: “Do not be deceived. God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows” – the wise idea that we will get out of the world what we put into it. By now we know that God doesn’t necessarily work according to this type of wisdom. God is mysterious and doesn’t always ‘play by the rules.’ I would venture to say, though, that we shouldn’t throw this type of wisdom to the wayside. There is a time and place for it and, clearly, it’s important! So, I’m going to run with this metaphor this morning.

When you sow something, you plant it. When you plant, you expect your seed to take root and you expect to see fruit, in some form or another. Sowing is planting, with expectation. It is not passive or involuntary. You may remember the parable of the sower in Matthew 13 and Luke 8. The ‘seed’ can be symbolic of many things (e.g., God’s word, God’s disciples, etc.). Bottom line is, sowing involves spreading, with intention. Giving of ourselves for the glory of Christ. Here’s the kicker: God expects us to sow *even when* it feels like we don’t have anything left. Even in a drought. Even in our Job moments, in times of challenge.

Reaping, too, is work – necessary work. It’s hard to know how to *respond* (I’m using those two terms somewhat interchangeably this morning) to God in times of struggle, when God seems distant, when our crops look inadequate, other than to question God and to get angry with God – a human instinct, which, as we know from Job, is futile. Often, it seems like one of our human follies is to search for worldly solutions to our problems. I make this claim because *I* am guilty of this. It’s easy to use our energy to drown our sorrows with material possessions and short-term gratifications. My wonderful husband can attest that after my Grandma’s death I bought two coloring books and an 88-pack of art markers – I don’t know that I have a crafty bone in my body! I just felt like I needed a consolation prize for my sorrow. It’s easy to say things like, *I’m sad, but I’ll eat this danish and I’ll feel better. I’m bored or lonely, so I’ll scroll through social media to see what*

new gadget, home decor item, vacation destination, significant other, body type, fill in the blank I need to fulfill this longing for more. I'm grieving, so I deserve this tub of ice cream. I'm feeling insecure, but I probably just need to buy a new wardrobe. Work is really stressful right now. A glass of wine will take the edge off. These are just examples. My father often likes to remind me, 'You can't take it with ya.' None of those examples of responding to struggle will truly satiate us. None of them require setting our minds to sacred ideals, to God or to our treasures in Heaven. I'll pose these questions: What if, instead of spending, we served or tithed? Instead of shopping, we got out into Creation to reflect on God's faithfulness? Instead of idolizing work, sports, or celebrities, we idolize the One ultimate Example – we turn to God. What if, instead of isolating ourselves or creating divisions, we sought one another out – sought God out, even when God appears to be hiding from us. This idea aligns, too, with Aquinas' theodicy. A defining part of Aquinas' view was his reproach of Job's friends, who, if you remember, had the wrong idea of the problem of evil in the earlier chapters of Job – that evil is *always* a result of one's sin. Stump writes this in her analysis, "Aquinas's worldview, characterized by a renunciation of the things of this world and a rush toward Heaven, is a particularly good one to juxtapose to the worldview of our culture, steeped in comforts and seeking pleasure" (Stump 64). When we feel hopeless, it seems joy doesn't always come immediately from worldly comforts (though they might be necessary to cope), but rather with a focus on our Savior and our long-term destination. That is *truly* reaping shouts of joy. That is living in an abundance mindset.

Harvesting, in sum, is sometimes dreadful (especially in a weedy field or after a hailstorm or a surprise frost or flood or when breakdowns happen), but it has to happen. Every part of it; sowing *and* reaping. You may even find yourself doing both, simultaneously. A Kansas farmer can't merely plant a crop of wheat and sit back on the porch all of June. Harvest doesn't work without our honest and continuous effort. All farmers can attest that not every crop is ideal. No one season is exactly like another. Harvest, nonetheless, is

trusting in the uncertainty. In the waiting period. In the dark. That God will provide. The seed will break through the soil. Fortunes will be restored. The answer you receive or the harvest you reap may not be what you hoped for, though there is certainty in knowing that the God of harvest is one of constant loyalty and promise. Some of you might recall that Lois gave a sermon the first Sunday in October reflecting on what it means to have 'enough.' As a human race, we're really good at complaining when we feel we don't have enough. *I do that!* However, God is the inventor of 'enough.' God will always provide.

Let's spend just a minute on Mark and blind Bartimaeus. I actually find lots of parallels in this Gospel account to that of Job. God turned Job's world upside down and, remember, Jesus lived by an upside-down philosophy. "The last shall be first. If you do this for the least of these, you have done so for me." Here he goes again. A blind beggar on a roadside. An outcast. At his bottom. Bartimaeus had nothing. But he *did* have unwavering faith. He sowed his faith. Even in uncertainty and trial. Faith in a God-figure he literally could not see. Jesus recognized him in the crowd as a valued and autonomous individual. He looked at him and loved him. Restored his sight solely because of his relentless faith. I'll confess that usually I think I'm being a decent Christian until I'm walking the streets of a populous city. I become judgmental (or more so), skittish, timid. I walk faster when I see someone shaking uncontrollably, holding a cardboard sign. I scoot aside to avoid the person huddled in rags, pushing a shopping cart on the corner. If Jesus were on Earth today, I am confident we would find him there, on the street corner. He would not be in the room of the business executive getting a promotion. He would probably not be at the political rallies. He would be with the Bartimaeus', the women at the well, the Jobs. The lost, the searching, the poor, the homeless, the grieving, the outcast. He is near to all of us, but especially to those suffering. My Grandma who passed was legally blind and especially suffered in her latter years of life, but had the most unwavering faith and determination, like Bartimaeus, and I just grew a

tremendous appreciation for those suffering with disabilities. Grandma continues to be an inspiration for what sowing looks like for me, even and especially through difficulty. It might be smiling at the homeless person on the corner. Opening a door for someone. Sharing a meal. Helping an elderly relative off the curb and into the car. Serving food to a weary couple in a New Mexico Denny's at midnight (those of you who were here last week will get that reference). Maybe just *being* – sitting in and with your faith. God is *good*, not only in the good. Says Job. Says Bartimaeus. Says Aquinas. I'm certain my Grandma's eyes have been opened and that she is reaping shouts of joy right now. You can be content, *even though*.... Joy and sorrow, hand-in-hand.

I promise I'm wrapping up, but I'm certain you're on the edges of your seats waiting to hear about *The Valley of Stagnation*. A few months ago, dad emailed me a link to a brief newsletter article. The newsletter is entitled *The Friday Five* – a new edition is released weekly, with five new ideas/concepts – a five minute read or less. The author of this newsletter is a man by the name of Sahil Bloom: Stanford graduate, writer, creator, investor and entrepreneur. I'm usually not one for unnecessary reading, but I subscribed to the free digital newsletter and have enjoyed skimming these brief articles every week. One of the ideas Bloom wrote on in one September issue was entitled *Question to Endure Stagnation*; stagnation meaning “lack of activity, growth, or development.” I found it compelling and relevant and I want to share it with you. While I'm reading, I want to invite you to reflect on how Bloom's ideas could be translated to a Christian context and how they connect to the thoughts about sowing, reaping and theodicy I've already shared with you. Bloom writes this:

“How will you respond when you find yourself in the valley?”

Last week, I had an interesting conversation with a 27-year-old reader.

She made a comment that stuck in my mind:

"It's easy to stay motivated when you have momentum."

She's right:

- It's easy to push when things are working.
- It's easy to feel energized when you can see the results of your actions.
- It's easy to feel certain when progress is felt.

But in my experience, you have to endure long periods of perceived stagnation—what I call the *Valley of Stagnation*—in between those periods of momentum.

The *Valley of Stagnation* is the test:

- How will you respond when you find yourself there?
- What will you do when you can't feel your growth?
- What will your motivation look like when you see no progress?
- How will you react when your effort feels hopeless?

The next time you find yourself in the Valley, ground yourself in a few important truths:

1. Nothing bad ever came from diligent, focused effort. You may not achieve the thing you set out to achieve, but you will learn, you will improve, you will gain in some regard.
2. Choose your beliefs wisely. You attract what you put out. Confirmation bias in life: Whatever you believe about yourself, you will find evidence to confirm that belief. Believe you're worthless—you'll find evidence to confirm that. Believe you're worthy—you'll find evidence to confirm that. Belief can create your reality. You choose.
3. Embrace the cyclical nature of life. In Ancient Indian traditions, there is a belief in a concept called the Wheel of Time (or "kalachakra") that says time goes through a natural three-part cycle of Creation, Destruction, and Rebirth. Every period of creation is followed by a period of destruction. Every period of destruction is followed by a rebirth and period of creation. The lesson: Always believe the valley is followed by a brilliant climb to a new summit.

If you center around these three truths, you will endure the pain of the *Valley of Stagnation* and find your way to the other side.”

So, as we enter the Thanksgiving season, I might challenge you (and I'm challenging myself to do the same) to focus on your fortunes and the ways God's faithfulness has prevailed in your life. Focus, also, on your

challenges. How do we/can we respond in *The Valley of Stagnation*? Are we responding in the way God would hope for us to respond? If not, how can we adjust? How can we *sow*? Even if it's one tiny step. *God, I can take one minute of my day to thank you for what you've done in my life, even as I grieve. God, I will read a portion of your word every morning to center myself for the day. God, I will reach out to my neighbor and ask how I can help them and pray for them in their time of need. I know that your good and restorative plan will prevail in my life. I know I don't have all the answers, and I know I don't have to.* I think Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message*, puts it plainly in his interpretation of Psalm 126: 4-6:

And now, GOD, do it again—
bring rains to our drought-stricken lives
So those who planted their crops in despair
will shout "Yes!" at the harvest,
So those who went off with heavy hearts
will come home laughing, with armloads of blessing.

I want to leave you with a song by a contemporary Christian group that I've just discovered recently. The group is fittingly named "Harvest," and this song is entitled "Shouts of Joy." I know you all probably have varying opinions on contemporary music but this one's only one minute long. As you listen, I'd invite you to reflect on the valleys you've endured in your life, that God has brought you out of. Or, if you're currently treading through a valley, take time to decompress and be reminded of God's healing, comforting promise. Set your mind to the One who has your best interest in mind, "get up and follow," go home laughing, encouraged, and patiently cultivate your harvest. May *all* of our eyes be opened, that we might hear *and* see God's faithfulness in new ways this week. God is good, **all the time**. Amen.