DIFFICULT LIFE LESSONS- PART THREE
Scripture: Mark 10:35-45 and Job 38

FOCUS: We are prone to asking questions and making demands, God seeks to as us the questions and to make demands of us

***“Welcome to God's House, the most dangerous place in town: where we talk about and with God, and are reduced to silence so we may hear the call to discipleship.”*** We spoke those words a few moments ago. I frequently remind you and myself that we have gathered here to allow the Spirit of God to speak to us. Yet I wonder how many of us really expect to hear anything? I doubt any of us came this morning expecting an audible voice from God and we would probably have a difficult time figuring out how to react if we did! My first thought might be that one of you forgot to mute your cell phone, or that someone was driving by with the radio blasting. Job encountered just such a voice. He must have been about as shocked as we would be. Only after reading 37 chapters, composed of thousands of words, in which Job repeatedly laments God’s silence, do we find that God speaks. And God speaks for a long time, for four chapters. More about that later.

As we left Job last week his friends had all attempted to convince him to accept the prevailing logic of the day, that suffering is always directly linked to sin. They insisted that since Job was certainly suffering, having lost everything and been afflicted with a horrible and disgusting disease, he was undeniably guilty of something and should simply face the fact and ask forgiveness. But Job would have none of it. He held fast to what he knew to be true, that his suffering was undeserved, and insisted that his friends were wrong.

Job finally had enough of listening to the repeated arguments of his friends. He began a lengthy defensive discourse. After having been briefly interrupted by Bildad with one more iteration of the same old argument, Job continued his discourse ***“Well, you’ve certainly been a great help to a helpless man! You came to the rescue just in the nick of time! What wonderful advice you’ve given to a mixed-up man! What amazing insights you’ve provided! Where in the world did you learn all this? How did you become so inspired?”*** You have got to love a guy skilled in sarcasm. Job continues to state his case. He chronicles his faithfulness and outlines his innocence, he laments his situation and expresses frustration with the silence of his God. He reacts as most of us would likely act, crying out, complaining and asking those hard “why” questions. Job has all but given up on his friends, now he is directing his frustration, directing his questions more toward God than to his friends.

Job’s friends have given up on him as well. We read that the three ***“ceased to answer Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes.”*** We are then introduced to a fourth friend who had apparently been there all along. Elihu has held his tongue because he is significantly younger than the others. Out of respect for their age and probably at least a bit intimidated by his elders, he has keep silent. But finally he can hold his tongue no longer. His is far more a voice of reason than were the voices of his friends. He finds fault with all four of the others, with the three for their pigheaded insistence that they have the answer to Job’s question, with Job because he continues to insist so loudly that God has been unfair, proclaiming his own righteousness while questioning the righteousness of God.

We should not lose sight of the fact that Job is a good guy, but that is all he is, a guy, fully human and not completely sinless. We are not told of any transgression, but sin is simply a part of the package which comes with being a guy! And with being a gal! Having found his boldness and having chastised the other three friends for their ill-conceived consolation of Job, Elihu addresses his suffering friend. His basic premise is not all that much different from that of the elder three. ***“Let me tell you, Job, you’re wrong, dead wrong!”*** he begins.

But his response is far more reasoned and helpful, if still hard for Job to hear. The problem with the common argument of the elder three is that it was lacking in compassion and empathy. They had their answer and they were going to force feed it to Job whether he found it palatable or not. Elihu doesn’t offer a pat answer. He really offers no answer. Rather he encourages Job to consider the nature of God and to recognize that while God’s ways can be incomprehensible to us, God’s majesty and power are irrefutable.

***“God is far greater than any human. So how dare you haul him into court, and then complain that he won’t answer your charges? God always answers, one way or another, even when people don’t recognize his presence. If God is silent, what’s that to you? If he turns his face away, what can you do about it? But whether silent or hidden, he’s there, ruling, so that those who hate God won’t take over and ruin people’s lives. . . If you’re so smart, give us a lesson in how to address God. We’re in the dark and can’t figure it out. Do you think I’m dumb enough to challenge God? Wouldn’t that just be asking for trouble?”***

Elihu then gives what becomes a prelude to what God will have to say to Job. He speaks at length of all the wonders of the created world and ends with these words, ***“The Almighty – we cannot find him; he is great in power and justice, and abundant righteousness, doing no wrong. Therefore mortals fear him; yet he does not regard any who are wise in their own conceit.”*** You see that was the problem with the three elder friends. They were well meaning, they genuinely cared about Job, but somehow they became convinced that they were wise enough to answer what is truly an unanswerable question. They were wise in their own conceit.

Elihu didn’t claim superior wisdom, didn’t offer a neatly packaged answer. What he did encourage Job to do was to look beyond the unanswered questions. He prodded Job to contemplate the wonder of the works of God’s hand, to consider how confounding the ways God sometimes communicates are. In chapter 33 Elihu says, ***“For God speaks in one way, and in two, though people don’t perceive it.”***  He mentions specifically dreams and suffering. I’m reminded of C. S. Lewis’ words from his book on this matter of suffering. He says that sometimes suffering is God’s megaphone. The implication is that sometimes when we have listened to nothing else we will listen to suffering. Elihu doesn’t claim to understands it all, to have answers. He simply paints a picture of awe. As we struggle to understand our trials we would do well to move our focus away what we cannot understand. We need to ponder what we can know, what we can surmise about God from observing God’s actions in the world and observing the wonder of the created order. We need encounter the inescapable truth that the God who created the universe is a God whose wisdom and power far exceed anything the human mind can grasp. That is what Elihu called on Job to do.

The scripture moves abruptly form Elihu’s speech to the appearance of God through the whirlwind. The voice of God puts Job immediately on notice and sets the tone. ***“Who is this who spouts off about me without the benefit of knowledge?”*** A startling and shocking opening statement. Job has been lamenting the silence of God, has dared question the wisdom of what God has been doing. Now, after having all but given up on getting a response, Job hears those words. He wanted answers but instead got a question. That seems to be a hallmark of God’s interaction with us. How many times did Jesus turn back trick questions with questions of his own? Which brings us to our other text. I bet some of you wondered how I was going to tie the two together. When I first began thinking about all the lectionary texts for today I failed to get a connection.

Finally I came to realize that the unifying theme is the matter questions and requests, those we ask and those which are ask of us. Like Job and like James and John we are pretty well practiced at asking questions and making requests, of each other, of God, of authority figures. I have said many times that it is a good thing to ask questions, that God encourages us to do so. I am absolutely convinced that is true. But we must be certain we are asking the right questions and for the right reason. And we would be wise to rarely if ever make demands and to ask favors only sparingly and for good reason. Unfortunately we are pretty good at asking and demanding we have that down pretty well. But if we are to be true disciples of Christ we need to allow God to question us, to make demands of us, and we are not so good at that. For that to happen we must make time and space in our lives for God.

The problem with many of our questions and demands is that they have more in common with those of the disciples than with Job’s. Job was struggling with fundamental matters, wrestling with the meaning of life and seeking to encounter the voice of God. The disciples were looking for a favor. Job was desperately pleading for God to help him understand the suffering he had endured, he wanted answers. The disciples were maneuvering for special treatment and the fulfillment of their selfish quest for power and status.

There is a common thread in the opening responses of God to Job and Jesus to John and James. The two disciples ask for appointment to the most powerful positions in Jesus’ kingdom, a kingdom they mistakenly thought would be of this world. Jesus declares that James and John don’t know what it is for which they ask. He then asks if they are able to drink from the same cup and experience the same baptism as he. They respond eagerly that they are. Jesus says, indeed they will. But the cup and the baptism have nothing to do with privilege and power, rather they are about humility and service. He goes on to define greatness as servanthood, not what the brothers wanted to hear, but what they must hear if they are to be faithful.

When God finally addresses Job in the Good News version God says, ***“Who are you to question my wisdom with your ignorant, empty words?”*** We see in both texts a response which goes to the heart of the matter we are about this morning. In both cases the call is for folks to recognize that they are asking for and about things which they do not fully understand, things they most likely will never fully understand on this earth. Then in both passages the ones questioned, Jesus in the gospel lesson and God in Job, begin to question the questioners. As we ponder the matter of questions our thoughts ought to go to the matter of prayer. It is in prayer that we ask questions of God and it ought to be in moments of prayer that we make time and space for the voice of God.

So how does the voice come? I cannot tell you, for it comes in different ways to different folks, at different times. For Job it was dramatic, a voice blasting forth out of the eye of a storm. For Elijah up on the mountain, there were storms, there was an earthquake, there was fire, but the Lord was in none of them. It was out of the silence that Elijah heard the still small voice of God. There is no one “right” way for us to hear God. God may speak to us in different ways at different times and he may speak to you in a way he never speaks to me.

But we must be available or we very well might miss the voice or not recognize it for all the noise. If we are to hear the questions, and demands that God has for us we need to offer ourselves in intentional times of silence, for silence and listening are just as much a part of prayer as are our words. And we must be willing to, at least for a while, lay aside all our unanswered questions. I encourage each of you to join me in an intentional effort to make time every day, or at least most days to simply put aside all thoughts, all distractions, all questions and to turn off all your devices, or at least put them on vibrate. Then for a little while sit silently awaiting the voice of God.

It may not come at first. It will probably not come every day, but like Job, we will eventually hear the voice if we keep the faith, keep trying, and genuinely desire to hear, no strings attached. Like the brother disciples what we hear may not be what we were hoping for. Like Job we may find that we don’t get answers but questions, and that is not a bad thing. That is the difference between Job and the two disciples. The disciples were looking for a particular answer, Job just wanted to hear.

And boy did Job hear! But notice from our text, which was only about a third of the speech which includes at least 60 questions, Job never gets an answer, only questions meant to help him ponder with awe the majesty of God. He didn’t get any answers. So how did he respond? How would you respond? How ought we to respond? Well, tune in next week as we will conclude our journey through this intriguing little book and discover those answers.

In the meantime, I ran across these words from Edwina Gately this week. She writes, ***I am going to work with women in prostitution. I am not sure where to find them. First I must get to know the streets—wander around wherever I feel drawn. Only God could have got me into this! When I look around the streets of Chicago the whole thing just seems beyond me—so enormous. God is going to stretch me further than ever. I don’t know anything about this business. I have no idea of what I am doing or what I am getting into. Ignorance is often braver and more willing than knowledge. Perhaps I should throw myself in on trust and faith alone, rather than try to equip myself with fore-knowledge.”***

Gateley understood that she might not get answers to all her questions, but because she was willing to hear whatever the voice of God had to say, she was willing to move forward in faith, trusting in the one who gave, not answers, but direction. There is more to the story. From 1981 to 1982, Edwina lived for nine months in prayer and solitude in a hermitage in Illinois, doing that listening thing. Then in 1983, she spent over a year on the streets of Chicago walking with the homeless and women involved in prostitution. In response to what she saw Edwina founded Genesis House – a place of hospitality and nurturing for women involved in prostitution which continues to offer love and God’s grace to some of God souls in danger today.

I am certain that Edwina still has questions. But I am equally certain that she continues to open herself to the voice of God, willing to be questioned and to be directed. For your sake, for the sake of a world populated with those who need to be led and for the kingdom of the one who seeks, not to answer all the questions but to lead all the people, may we all be as attentive and responsive. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.