

I had the idea that I would do a ‘NORMAL’ sermon, now that we had dealt with the immediate loss of our building. I thought, read, and jotted some ideas down, and read some more, but it wasn’t happening. My heart wasn’t in it, and I realized that if my heart wasn’t in it yours wouldn’t respond. That sermon was too abstract, too “heady.” And then I realized that this was denial, the obvious first stage of grief. Metaphorically, I have a little Arlin, on one of my shoulders who watches what I do and say and think and often talks to me, saying things like “That doesn’t make sense! or, “Respond to that!” when I am only vaguely understanding something. That “observing self” told me I was “off in the weeds.” Denial is an unconscious defense mechanism against painful feelings we don’t want to acknowledge. Denial feels dull, distracted, or not quite present to both the person in denial and to others. I was in denial of my grief.

Sarita, my wife, told me that if I advertised that this sermon was about grief 25% of you wouldn’t show for the service. That isn’t a criticism. You have a right to not endure what is too painful to tolerate. And it isn’t really about grief but the response to loss after the first shock.

I’m not going to belabor sadness. But we are very newly displaced from our building. We have also suffered a series of deaths and departures that have

wounded us severely. They have affected us deeply. I called this sermon “New Beginnings” because what we do following loss is at least partly up to us. Not all of it is our choice, of course, or we wouldn’t have suffered a loss at all. Events affect us, and then we choose to respond. I will reference the Book of Job at times, because it is a case study about the implacability of fate and how to respond. Job’s struggles have been a classic for millennia. And a major loss in a family, or a community, alters the subsequent course of events.

Nathan Ackerman, one of the four “grandparents” of family therapy, made his entire career and therapeutic focus on deaths in family systems. He wanted to know who died or suddenly left and when and then traced the decisions family members made because of that loss. He traced the choices people made, and the assumptions those choices were made on. After a hole has been ripped through a family because of death or loss of a person or home, people are shocked, they tend to regroup according to deeply primitive beliefs.

So when we look at the Book of Job, we learn immediately that Job lost everything except his wife. He lost his house, children, flocks, and his health, but he didn’t die. He lost all of that because God made a bargain with the Devil to test Job. That isn’t important as debatable truth and I assume few of you would

buy that as literally true, except that after a huge loss we can emotionally feel like we are being punished unfairly. The word “pain” comes from the same Latin root as “punish” and penalty.” In mourning, we have been abandoned by Fate, or the universe or God, whatever name you want for the reality of Being Itself that is beyond understanding. The Book of Job is about internal fantasies and assumptions as if they were a script for a play that conveys how deep within us there is a terrible sense of unfair abandonment after extreme losses.

Job complains to God, and says that if he could drag him into a court of law he would prove his innocence, his good character. Job is my kind of guy. His friends tell him that he must have done SOMETHING wrong, maybe he didn't know it at the time. Job doubles down, and responds that he is worthy of respect. He becomes angry and seeks to bargain with God. This is a pretty good defense against hopelessness, despair, and sadness. When I was helping the cleanup crew that first Sunday, and Monday I was angry. I was angry at the governmental lethargy that did not fix our flooding problem years ago when we told local officials about it. I was angry that one of our picnic tables ended up way back in the woods and I couldn't get it out from under a heavy wall. I was angry at climate change deniers. I was angry at fate as I buried a drowned rabbit. Job said:

Let me but call a witness in my defense! Let the Almighty state his case against me! If my accuser has written out his indictment, I would not keep silence and remain indoors. No! I would flaunt it on my shoulder . . .(31:35-37)

So I wanted to yell at someone, like Job yelled at his so-called friends, but it wasn't really about me vs someone else.

I felt a little like Job during this crisis, when people outside the congregation suggested: "Have you thought of FEMA? Have you looked at your insurance?" because it implied we couldn't have thought of it and partly because it is cold to just give solutions. Did they really think we hadn't done that? What did warm my heart is that Rev. Dr. Meredith Garmin from the White Plains church called very quickly and asked what we needed. "Money," I said. They are sending a \$10,000 check and will send people to work if we need them. And Rev. Kristina Church said in an email:" I mentioned FUSW in our service this past week [to my Erie, PA congregation], and shared that you all are on my heart" and that contributions would be gratefully accepted. And Rev. Dr. Emily Brown, from the Hastings Reformed Church, emailed me that they are concerned for us and will send a check, people if we need them, and provide temporary space. These responses are empathy in action at a parallel point to where Job felt unfairly punished and blamed by his so-called friends. Simply heartwarming.

Thus far, the Book of Job is in a stand-off with nobody moving. Would it surprise you that the Book of Job is very popular in schools of divinity? Students preparing for the ministry realize at some point that they have an impossible task if they are trying to sell people on a Being that is all-powerful and loving, but people are still poor, oppressed, and dying. Finally, Job accepts that he cannot understand, control or bargain with an all-powerful God who says to him directly:

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?

Tell me, if you know and understand.

Who settled its dimensions? Surely you should know.

...

Who provides the raven with its quarry

When its fledglings croak for lack of food?

Do you know when the mountain-goats are born

Or attend the wild doe when she is in labour? (Job 38:4-5 and 41, 39:1)

Job responds by telling God that he accepts his insignificance.

Acceptance is not resignation. Acceptance is understanding deep within us that this is the nature of life and we are going to embrace it. We can change our response to a vigorous engagement with life. We can choose to pursue our highest values and be the best we can possibly be, in the humble understanding

that it all falls apart sometimes and finally. We can choose to enjoy what we have and who we are, and strive for more without stopping, because that is what it means to be most human. Kate Bowler, a highly accomplished associate professor at Duke Divinity School, ended her recent article about her Stage IV cancer with this:

All of our accomplishments, ridiculous. All of our striving, unnecessary. Our lives are unfinished and unfinishable. We do too much, never enough and are done before we've even started. We can only pause for a minute, clutching our to-do lists, at the precipice of another bounded day. The ache for more—the desire for life itself—is the hardest truth of all.

Yes, the desire for life itself is a hard truth, and it is the springboard we can use to launch ourselves into living fully. Pat Calahan asked, repeatedly, "What is my time worth?" so as to maximize time spent with loved ones. That hard truth reminds us to energetically and enthusiastically choose to do something--or nothing. That hard truth tells us that our one, precious life is best directed at what fulfills us. Acceptance is not grudging resignation, it is making the most of your recognition that life is limited but we still have scope for acting on our fate. We can be quiet when that is fitting; we can work when we need to; we can serve others when we feel the love. My mantra, when under duress, is: "What have you got left?" so that I can begin again. Every day is a new beginning anyway. We

have enough control over any day that we can make a different decision about what we “plan to do with our one wild and precious life.”