

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(October 27, 2013)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: GOD...in the Storm

(Studies in the book of Job)

The Gospel According to Elihu¹

(Elihu, part 2, Job 32-37)

Study #9

Introduction: Breathing easy, for now...

I got a lucky break on Friday.

Around noon, a couple I have known and who have been a part of our church for a very long time, good friends, stopped by the church to tell me that the husband had just been fired from a job he had held for fourteen years.

He had done well in that job. He had been promoted, had served the company, had trained a generation's worth of younger leaders, and had been given more than his share of responsibility.

A couple of weeks ago, a turf war broke out among upper level management and my friend was the innocent bystander who got canned.

Now, my friend is a man of integrity, so when he told me the story (even though I know there are always two sides to any story) I instinctively knew that he was telling it to me straight.

So, I braced myself for what I feared might come AFTER he told me the story - and it never came. There was no railing at God for injustice. There was no self-pity.

Instead, what I heard was a mature response. *"Hey. Life is hard. Life may throw some hard stuff at you, but God is good. God knows what He's doing. We just need to trust Him in this."* His wife, sitting with him, echoed those thoughts.

I rejoiced at their maturity and inwardly breathed a sigh of relief.

I got a break. My friends could have walked into my office storming, angry at the world, looking for vengeance, and angry at God. What would I have said then?

The irony is that when they walked in, I was in the middle of preparing today's message, a sermon in which I'm hoping to help us all see how we might help our suffering friends find God in the middle of their suffering.

I got a pass. I didn't have to go there. But we won't always get a pass.

There will be those times when your friend rails at God. Life will deliver a devastating blow and he will struggle with bitterness. She will accuse God of injustice.

When that day comes, what will you say? How will you help?

I'm hoping that today will provide some guidance as we listen to what Elihu, a young man, had to say to Job in the midst of his struggles.

Review...

Together, you and I have seen that Job suffered devastating losses of **wealth**, **loved ones** (all ten of his children), and **health**. And we, who know the backstory, know - and are perhaps troubled to know - that Job suffered these losses because God was willing to allow Satan to afflict him.

Adding to Job's woes were his "friends" who proved to be exceptionally poor counselors, (Job called them *"sorry comforters"* - 16:2), as they defaulted to accusation and explanation.

¹ With apologies to Mike Mason, author of the excellent book, The Gospel According to Job, and gratitude to Jim Reitman who used this phrase ("...According to Elihu") in his very helpful guide to Job, Unlocking Wisdom.

And, over time, we have watched Job sink into the ugliness of demandingness. He came to **demand** that his friends provide him compassion and then he **demanded** that God grant him relief.

By the time the speeches of Job came to an end (the end of chapter 31), he was demanding that God meet him, face to face, as in a courtroom, to hear his case. He was confident that he would be acquitted and that God would be convicted of running an unjust, lousy universe.

Enter Elihu.²

This young man is given six full chapters of speaking time in the book of Job, more space than was given to Eliphaz, Bildad, or Zophar.

As we saw last Sunday, Elihu worked hard to grease the skids so that Job could easily listen to what he had to say. He did this by convincing him that he, Elihu, was FOR Job. He was not against him.

Elihu approached Job as a person, not as an issue to be resolved. He called him by name - "Job" as the three friends never did. And he was personally "present." He had emotional skin in the game.³

Today, if you and I would be helpful to our friends who are going through tough times (and we desperately want to be helpful to our friends who are suffering!), we would do well to follow Elihu's lead.

- We will APPROACH our friend as a person, not an issue;
- We will ASSURE our friend that we are for her/him;
- We will ENGAGE our friend with deep emotional investment.

² There are different ways of viewing Elihu's contribution to the book of Job. If we view Job as a paragon of faithful endurance through suffering, than Elihu is an angry, self-inflated gadfly who only intensifies Job's unjust suffering. If Job is a believer who has lost confidence in God's justice and care and has need to repent, Elihu becomes God's inspired spokesman and Job's longed-for mediator (9:33; 16:19; 19:25). This second way is certainly how I am viewing Elihu.

³ Elihu invites Job to listen to him and affirms that he is speaking by integrity and by the Spirit of God. (See Job 33:1-7)

No doubt about it - Elihu was a spokesman from God⁴ and we are called to pay attention to what he has to say.

Elihu spent lots of time convincing Job that he was a safe person and that he wasn't out to "get him." But it eventually came time to respond to Job's accusations that God was an unjust and uncaring cosmic dictator.⁵

Not surprisingly, Elihu's efforts at helping Job are aimed at restoring Job's understanding of exactly WHO God is.⁶

If we are going to help our friends who suffer as they wrestle with God over their sufferings, we will want to help them regain (or gain for the first time) a true idea of "*who are in Heaven.*"

During the course of his struggles and trials, Job had become confused. He lost focus on what he had previously believed about God and he had come to have a hyper-inflated view of himself.

Re-cap: Job vs. God (33:8-13)

Job's Beef with God (vv. 8-11)

Elihu says,

[8] "Surely you (i.e. - Job) have spoken in my hearing, And I have heard the sound of your words:

[9] 'I am pure, without transgression; I am innocent and there is no guilt in me.'"

Now, we don't deny for a minute that Job was a good guy. He did all sorts of good things for the poor and the weak, the widow and the orphan.

⁴ Elihu repeatedly claims that his words are inspired. (32:8, 18; 33:3-4; 36:2-4)

⁵ Although Elihu has been speaking for some time now, he doesn't actually begin to rebut Job's arguments until 33:8.

⁶ For Job to confidently accept Elihu's correction regarding how his own righteousness relates to God's absolute sovereignty and justice, he must first be convinced that God is fully redemptive.

But his claims to be “pure...without transgression...innocent...no guilt” are a bit of a stretch. He holds himself in too high regard. He’s crossed a line.

Then, too, his accusations against God are extreme.

**[10] ‘Behold, He invents pretexts against me;
He counts me as His enemy.**

**[11] ‘He puts my feet in the stocks;
He watches all my paths.’**

After all of the discussion with his friends and the long debates, (Job, chapters 4-31!) Job’s prime interest has become vindication in the eyes of his friends and God.

He wanted to hear somebody say, “Job, you’re right. You haven’t done anything wrong. God’s made a huge mistake and I’m sure He’s going to tell you how sorry He is real soon.”

Well, he certainly wasn’t going to hear those words from Elihu!

Elihu Calls Job Out on This (vv. 12-13)

**[12] “Behold, let me tell you, you are not right in this,
For God is greater than man.**

**[13] “Why do you complain against Him
That He does not give an account of all His doings?”**

And here, Elihu (for the first and not the last time) takes Job back to first principles. And the very First Law of the Universe is this: There is a God and it is not you.

Further, God - being GOD - is not obligated to explain Himself or His ways to anybody. God doesn’t need Job’s permission - or yours or mine - for anything He might choose to do.⁷

⁷ Earlier, Job had insisted that God justify His treatment of him. (7:20-21; 10:2; 13:3, 13-23; 17:3-5; 23:2-12; 31:35-37.)

But Job’s perspective is that God is against him. Further, that God is standoff-ish, removed, and distant. To that, Elihu again says that Job’s got it all wrong.

True, God doesn’t respond to our demands, but He is passionate about letting people know about Him and His ways.

For one thing, He communicates.

God, the Pursuer (33:14-28)

He Communicates (vv. 14-16)

**[14] “Indeed God speaks once,
Or twice, yet no one notices it.”⁸**

**[15] “In a dream, a vision of the night,
When sound sleep falls on men,**

While they slumber in their beds,

**[16] Then He opens the ears of men,
And seals their instruction**

Dreams and visions

God communicates and Elihu says that His communication sometimes comes through dreams and visions.

Today, in lands where there is little or no Christian witness and no access to Bibles, there are lots of stories of people coming to faith in the true God and in Jesus through visions and dreams.⁹

A couple of years ago, I was speaking with Chuck Sneesby, a missionary we have supported for over twenty years and he told me that a primary way he has seen Hindus in India come to faith in Christ is through miracles and healing. That’s God communicating.

Creation, Scripture, Jesus!

⁸ “Once or twice” = over and over and over again.

⁹ We read these reports especially of people in Muslim lands (Iran and Iraq, in particular). See Ecclesiastes 3:11-15 - God’s communication may come through man’s conscience or “cosmic awareness” so as to keep him accountable to God.

As well, God communicates who He is through the creation. A beautiful sunny day, a stormy night, a starlit sky, the vastness of the ocean, the starkness of the desert, the majesty of the mountains all declare God's amazing grandeur.

Then, open the Bible and you will learn of His mercy and grace and love and holiness and justice. God certainly didn't have to leave us a written record of His ways, but because He wants us to know Him, that is exactly what He did.

And then, we, today, have communication about God through Jesus. His teachings and miracles and loving, tender strength tell us more about God than we would have ever learned on our own.

When Elihu spoke to Job there was no written Scripture and it was long before Jesus lived, but even back then, God was committed to communication.¹⁰

Further, Elihu says that the purpose behind God's proactive communication to us is that He might protect us.

He Protects (vv. 17-18)

*[17] That He may turn man aside from his conduct,
And keep man from pride;*

*[18] He keeps back his soul from the pit,
And his life from passing over into Sheol.*

When God looks at the people He created He sees, on the one hand, the objects of His love. He desperately loves you and me and everybody you and I know.

On the other hand, he sees people in grave danger of self-destruction. He knows our tendency toward destructive patterns of behavior and thought. And, God knows that if we lead the kinds of lives we would lead if left to our own devices, we will end up eternally lost, forever estranged from Him.

But God wants us to choose life and so He gives us warnings.

There is so much in Scripture that is written explicitly to warn us against bad behaviors and unhealthy attitudes. The Bible truly leads us in the paths of joy and peace and life.

In addition, He has given us the very good gift of conscience. Now conscience is not a perfect guide, but it is a God-given an inner guide that shouts "*Stop!*" when we do what we know is wrong.

All of this says so much about the goodness of God. No power and no person was forcing God to warn us. But He warned us anyway, a function of His great compassion.

Then, Elihu goes on to expand Job's thinking about God and His ways by saying that it is God who allows suffering.

In other words, "*No, Job, God is not standoff-ish. He is not removed and uninvolved. In fact, it is He who opens the door for hard times and suffering, for challenges and trials.*"

He Allows Suffering (vv. 19-22)

*[19] "Man is also chastened with pain on his bed,
And with unceasing complaint in his bones;*

*[20] So that his life loathes bread,
And his soul favorite food.*

*[21] "His flesh wastes away from sight,
And his bones which were not seen stick out.*

*[22] "Then his soul draws near to the pit,
And his life to those who bring death.*

Notice that Elihu doesn't tie in suffering with sin, as Job's friends did. They insisted that suffering is always explained by the suffering person's misbehavior.

Elihu doesn't say that at all. But he affirms the reality of suffering and he affirms that God has a hand in it - even if it is a passive, permissive hand.

In just a moment we'll hear Elihu speak to the purpose behind God's policy of allowing suffering.

¹⁰ Sadly people ignore that communication (33:14b - "*no one notices it*").

But before we get there we hear of one more way in which God pursues people. Elihu speaks of God's use of mediators / advocates.

He Uses a Mediator to Turn a Person to Life (vv. 23-28)

[23] *"If there is an angel as mediator for him,
One out of a thousand,
To remind a man what is right for him,
[24] Then let him be gracious to him, and say,
'Deliver him from going down to the pit,
I have found a ransom';
[25] Let his flesh become fresher than in youth,
Let him return to the days of his youthful vigor;
[26] Then he will pray to God, and He will accept him,
That he may see His face with joy,
And He may restore His righteousness to man.
[27] "He will sing to men and say, 'I have sinned and perverted what is
right,
And it is not proper for me.
[28] 'He has redeemed my soul from going to the pit,
And my life shall see the light.'*

Sometimes, God will send a mediator

Elihu says that God will, at times, send someone to a person who will direct them to His truth.

This person (the mediator) will **graciously remind** the needy person of what is right, will **deliver** the one who is Hell-bent for destruction, will **intercede** (pray to God) for the person in need, will **restore** the person to a right standing before God, and will lead the person to praise God for His salvation.

It is a tremendous gift when God sends such a mediator. That is exactly the role that Elihu had been sent to play for Job.

And that is also the role that God send another Advocate to play for you and me.

*One time, God sent a **MEDIATOR***

Everything that Elihu did for Job, Jesus did for all of humanity to the Nth degree two thousand years ago.

He brought us grace, delivered us from death, interceded for us, restored us to life through His death, brought us salvation, and put a song of praise to God in our hearts.

So, God has pursued people in all kinds of ways. He has communicated, protected, allowed suffering, and sent mediators. Why?

God Does All That He Does to Redeem (33:29-33)

[29] *"Behold, God does all these oftentimes with men,
[30] To bring back his soul from the pit,
That he may be enlightened with the light of life.*

The Redemptive Purpose of Communication, Protection, Mediation

All that God does, He does to redeem us. His involvement in our lives is to bring us back from a destructive "**pit**" and to bring us to His salvation.

Now, it's relatively easy to see how God's work in communicating His ways, and His work of protecting us from self-destruction, and His work of appointing mediators to direct us in the way of life are all redemptive; they all show God's love and goodness.

It's a bit harder to see the redemptive purpose of suffering. But Elihu wants Job and us to know that God allows suffering into our lives for redemptive purposes, too.

The Redemptive Purpose of Suffering

Suffering is, sometimes, the consequence of bad behavior

Of course, there is no question that sometimes we suffer as a direct result of our bad decisions, bad behavior, or lack of wisdom. Our choices may lead to a terrible harvest of consequences.

But Job wants to know about HIS suffering, the innocent kind where there is no clear cause-effect relationship between sin and suffering. Frankly, we wonder about that, too.

Again, let's listen to Elihu.
Suffering is, often, God's wake-up call

[29] ***“Behold, God does all these oftentimes with men,
[30] To bring back his soul from the pit,
That he may be enlightened with the light of life.***

So, what is the ***“pit”*** from which God seeks to deliver someone?

I suppose the ***“pit”*** could be a figure of speech for lots of things. It could be that Elihu has in mind eternal separation from God in Hell.

However, based on what I see as the major thrust of Elihu's speech, I think the ***“pit”*** from which God wants to deliver us is the idea that we can live independent of God, or to use the word Elihu used earlier, ***“pride”*** (33:17).

The most dangerous, soul-killing, God-estranging sin around is not addiction to alcohol or drugs. It's not sexual sin. It's not anger or greed or even hatred. It is the notion that God is not or that if He is, He is irrelevant.

As God sees it, the worst predicament anyone can ever be in is to believe, *“I've got this”* about life. That is life in the ***“pit.”*** There is no good end to that way of thinking.

Sometimes, instruction from Scripture will heighten our awareness of God and will bring us out of the pit. Sometimes a wise counselor, a mediator, will open our eyes to our need for Him.

But, often, more effective than anything else, **suffering** draws us to the realization that we aren't in control of what matters most to us.

Suffering gets our attention in a way that prosperity and rich blessing and comfort and ease and counsel and advocacy don't.¹¹

¹¹ Note as well 2 Peter 3:8-9, Matthew 20:1-16; Luke 15 for God's willingness to use suffering redemptively.

God, who knows us better than we know ourselves, knows that we have problems. Big problems.

And we mistakenly think that our problems - how to pay the mortgage, that troubling health issue, the state of our marriage, the welfare of our daughter - are our biggest problems.¹²

God knows that what we call our “problems” are not our biggest problems. He knows that our biggest problem is that we don't live like the dependent people He created us to be.

So, He graciously allows suffering to come our way to wake us up to the futility of independence, the futility of self-sufficiency, the illusion that we are in control.

Suffering is extremely effective in opening our eyes.

When Jerry Sittser wrote a book about the terrible car wreck that killed his mother, his wife, and his daughter he didn't call the book, The Car Wreck that Ruined My Life. He titled it A Grace Disguised, because over time, Sittser found grace and strength and a deeper walk with God through his tragedy.

When Sheldon vanAuken wrote about the loss of the love of his life, the loss of his wife to disease, he titled the book, A Severe Mercy. He learned much about life and God through loss.

C. S. Lewis knew a lot about pain. His own wife died of cancer. He wrote the book The Problem of Pain. And he would go on to write, *“God whispers in all our pleasure, but He shouts in our pains. Pain is His megaphone to rouse a dulled world.”*

In the absence of suffering, any of us can be lulled into the false belief that we are the captains of our own ship, that we've got the whole world in our hands.¹³

¹² Yes, God sees the affliction of the oppressed - and He is moved by it. But He also sees their sin - and He views sin as a greater problem than affliction.

¹³ Without such opposition, chastening, trials, challenges, personal earthquakes, etc... we typically fail to seek God (Crabb, Finding God, chapter 15).

This - the independent streak - is the “*pit*” from which Elihu says God will graciously deliver. And he says that God will often do so by way of suffering.

I can personally testify that the seasons of greatest disruption in my life have been for me the seasons of my greatest intimacy with God.

Of course, those times when all is smooth and copacetic are nice. But spiritual breakthroughs have happened when life in the church is in turmoil, when there are challenges at home, when there has been disappointment.

And when your friend is reeling from some devastating blow, let her know that you are for her. Make sure he knows that you’re not out to get him.

And when his reeling turns to railing against God, lovingly and gently remind him of God’s goodness.

Remind him that God has revealed Himself to be a good and gracious Savior. Call him back to remember God’s protective ways. Talk with him about what his suffering might tell him about how little control he actually has in life, and then direct him to put his trust in the Rock, in God, not in himself.

Now, the purpose of Elihu’s first speech (32:6--33:7) was to convince Job that he was for him. The point of Elihu’s second speech (33:8-33) was to assure Job of something even more important: God is for you. Suffering people need to know that God is not out to get them. He is good and He intends to use what they are suffering redemptively.

Elihu is the forerunner to the Almighty and he has done an outstanding job of preparing us for what the Lord is going to say.

His major contribution today has been to arm us with evidence to present to our suffering friends that God is good.

Conclusion:

Right now, as we meet, a bunch of Middle Schoolers (gaggle? murder? confusion? - what is the collective term for Middle School

students) are camping at Inks Lake State Park. With them are PT Gaines and Tiffany Head and Jack and Sue Biros.

Jack lost his job of fourteen years on Thursday and is camping with young teens today. He and Sue took a hit and are still “on mission” for Jesus’ Great Commission.

That’s important. Remember. The whole reason for Job’s suffering was because Satan bet God that Job would fold if hardship hit. He would cease to trust and obey if trials came.

God said he wouldn’t. Today, God, Satan, the angels, friends and enemies are all watching to see what we will do when the chips are down.

You can play the part of Elihu with your suffering friend and point them toward faithfulness, even in their pain. Your loving assist will mean a win, both for God’s Kingdom AND for your friend.