

Experiencing God in a Broken World

Job 42:1-6, 10-17

Psalms 34:1-8, (19-22)

Hebrews 7:23-28

Mark 10:46-52

Have any of you ever been to the Grand Canyon? I remember as a child having my parents tell me we were going to go see this Grand Canyon thing. I was excited because they were excited, but I didn't really understand what it was all about. When I got there, standing on the edge of this ginormous crater, staring out over this massive abyss, I remember being unable to take my eyes off it. It was staggering in a way no one could have prepared me for. I've been back several times and have always felt the same way. Even though I have seen it with my own eyes. It's unspeakable. Some experiences simply cannot be captured in words.

Conversely, have any of you had an experience like this... A friend tells you about the greatest movie they ever saw. You simply have to go see it. And later, as you walk out of the theater, you find yourself asking, how they could have enjoyed that wretched film? What on earth did they like about it? Or the same thing can happen with restaurants or vacation spots. You understand the point, right?

Life is not about the experiences we have, but the way we experience our experiences. Two people can have the same things happen to them, good or bad, and come away with entirely different ways of expressing those same things. We are individuals, with different tastes and preferences, strengths and weaknesses, values and priorities. So much of our lives are about how we walk through them. We can't always choose our experiences; much of the time, life happens to us. But we can choose to influence how we experience the events of our lives.

Today we are going to talk about our experiences of God. Too often we live our lives apart from God, not actually, but certainly in our experience. Admittedly, being aware of the unseen in a world where we are constantly assaulted by visual input, makes remembering an unseen God a challenge. But more than that, we can fail to experience God because of a fracture in our relationship. Many things can cause breaches in our relationships.

Today's readings highlight a few. The great news is that there is a remedy. Even better, the more we experience God in our lives, the more we look for God; and the more we look, the more we find God to be present with us.

Lets begin with Job, whose experience of God could be seen as a really awful one. The text itself names God as the one who brought evil upon Job. And while we understand that Job's fortunes were restored, he had more children and lived the length of an additional lifetime of bounty after all he had suffered, we know that the experience of grief and loss is not one that is compensated by replacement family members. We read the words of God to Job and hear Job express his acceptance of a limited ability to understand things beyond his comprehension. But to us, it can feel unacceptable. The answers aren't good enough. Nevertheless, Job himself ends his experience in peace. Job's own experience of God brought contentment. He says, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you." He's basically saying that he heard people talk about God, but after having a personal encounter with God, his understanding had been opened in a profound way. The words say, "I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes," which is a poetical Hebrew way of expressing the humility he feels at being a human, limited in his ability to understand, and now his mind is changed to see himself in relation to God in a new way. If Job, who lost more than we can imagine, found peace through "seeing" God, we can conclude that there is something profoundly powerful about a personal experience with God.

Then we move to David's poetry. Psalm 34 is tremendously comforting, which makes sense because it was written immediately after his life was spared from a foreign king as he was fleeing from Saul. David movingly speaks of being seen by God, protected, delivered, heard, and answered. David was euphoric because he was saved. But he's equally honest about the reality of life in this world. Verse 9 of this Psalm affirms that, "Many are the troubles of the righteous." He isn't claiming that things always go his way. But David does compel us to taste for ourselves the goodness of God. He is certain that, even in the midst of the troubles of this life, all who put their trust in God, will personally experience God's faithfulness.

So we have heard from two poets, whose pain could have made them turn against God in anger, but their own experiences of God through tremendous loss and deep grief caused them to press in closer to God, seeing and tasting God's goodness even through their darkest personal valleys. Their example can be inspirational for us in pursuing our own experiences of God.

But the pain of life's experiences are not the only things that risk keeping us from witnessing God's goodness. Sometimes our own shame keeps us from approaching God. We fear God because of the things we have done, the things we have failed to do, or just a general sense of our own unworthiness. This is why the author to the Hebrews explains Jesus as a High Priest who "always lives to make intercession" for us. He pleads our prayers for us before God. Because of his perfection, we don't need to strive for our own. He beckons us and leads us to God who does not see our failings, but only Christ's righteousness. He wants us to come.

And speaking of feelings of unworthiness, Mark offers us the story of Blind Bartimaeus. For anyone who has ever felt isolated, lonely, forgotten or unwanted, Bartimaeus is a

tremendous comfort. He was positioned outside the city because of his affliction, and he was considered unclean and unwelcome among his peers. When he cried out for Jesus, he was hushed. Bartimaeus could have concluded that God had abandoned him and slunk back into the shadows, but he didn't. Jesus heard his cries, the ones he didn't allow the crowd to silence. And Jesus stopped. Jesus asked him to articulate his request and then he granted it. How many times do you suppose we miss out on a blessing simply because we fail to ask? Bartimaeus' experience of Jesus was being seen, valued, listened to, and healed. We don't know how long he'd lived as an outcast, but once he had his sight restored, he didn't stay sitting on the roadside angry or sad because of his lifetime of suffering. The experience he had with Jesus changed his life.

My favorite part of the story is Bartimaeus' disobedience. Jesus tells him to "go." But Bartimaeus had an experience with the living God, and he was unwilling to let Jesus get away. He could see; he could have gone on to live a normal life. But that is the thing about our experiences with God. The more we know God, the more we experience God, the more we recognize the hand of God at work in and around us, the more unwilling we become to allow distance to grow between us and our savior.

We were made to be in relationship with God and we **will** feel alienation when distance exists. Seeking God is about finding purpose, comfort, and joy. Seeking God is about the pursuit of experiencing life with God. Prayer is that awareness of God in the midst of life, it is an opportunity to see God at work, to join God in that work, to do what we were created to do, and to be whom we were created to be.

David tells us to taste and see that the Lord is good. It's easy to get wrapped up in fear and anxiety, allowing our experiences of life to teach us about God rather than our experiences of God teaching us what is true about life.

May we be a people who see. Whose sight compels us to continually pursue our relationship with God, dedicated to prayer, and eager to inspire other through our own stories of God's power, presence, and comfort.