

**The Holy Bible: Faith, Frustration & Fascination**  
**Can I Be Faithful and Have Questions?**  
**Job 42:1-8 CEB**  
**Sunday, September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022**  
**Rev. Rachel Callender**  
**Medford UMC; NJ**

Have you ever heard the story about the Mountain Man? Well, the Mountain Man lived away from any sort of civilization, far into the wilderness, but one day, made his way into New York City to visit his friend. They were walking through Times Square, people everywhere, the noise of cars and music and all the energy of city-life; when out of nowhere the Mountain Man says, “I hear a cricket.” His friend was in disbelief, “What? You must be crazy. You couldn’t possibly hear a cricket in all of this noise!”

“No, I’m sure of it,” said the Mountain Man, “I heard a cricket.”

“That’s crazy,” his friend replies.

The Mountain Man paused to listen closely for the direction of the cricket, then began walking across the street to some bushes – and would you believe it – there in the bush was a tiny cricket!

“That’s incredible,” his friend said, “You must have super-human ears!”

The Mountain Man replied, “No, my ears are no different from yours.”

“But that can’t be!” the friend exclaimed. “I could never hear a cricket in this noise.”

“Yes, you could, here, let me show you.” And with that, the Mountain Man removed a few coins from his pocket, and let them fall to the sidewalk with a light clatter.

Even with all the city noise still around, anyone anywhere nearby sharply turned their head to see where the money had come from.

The Mountain Man concluded, “See what I mean? It all depends on what’s important to you, what you’re listening for.”

What are we listening for? As we continue our series on looking at the way we use and interact with Holy Scripture, we are going to be talking about questioning today – and in many ways, discerning what’s important to us through what we’re listening for.

Our text today comes from the end of the Book of Job, one of my favorite books – and just the use of this book alone opens up an important discussion on how we approach and use scripture: Job is wisdom literature. That is very different than our text from 2 Timothy that we looked at last week. That was a letter, this is a story to offer a lesson. We wouldn’t read a Christmas Card from a colleague the same way we read “Harry Potter”. They’re two very different genres of writing and are to be approached as such. Job is not a letter, it’s not a prophecy, it’s not a law book, it’s not a Gospel biography, it’s not in the histories – it’s a story focused on the arc of a character – and even in the

very opening of Job, there's purposeful ambiguity to it. Job is not an Israelite, where he is from connects to no-where else in the Bible, and its place in history just doesn't seem to be traceable or important in any way. In fact, many scholars argue that the prologue and epilogue were added to the story later to give more of a cyclical way of telling it. Job rounds out some of the other wisdom literature: we have Proverbs which is all about the fairness of the world, and Ecclesiastes which argues that the world is unfair. The tension between those books is then often paired with the story of Job.

The basic premise is that Job is a faithful, wealthy man with a big family. He loves God and God loves him. Then, the Opposer, or the "Satan" (not the devil) challenges God that Job only loves God because of all the wonderful things he has and that if God took those things away, Job would no longer have faith. So, God allows the Satan to inflict suffering on Job (that's the part where we lose many people, but stay with me), and Job loses absolutely everything and what does Job do? Job praises God even amongst his undeserved, confusing suffering – whilst still acknowledging his very dark despair.

Now, he has the worst friends ever who try to offer very simplified solutions as to why this must have happened, all pointing towards Job having had done something really bad to deserve this. Job insists that he is innocent, and they all go back and forth for chapters on this. And in this questioning and rationale, we see Job in his pain and grief, swing between moments of love and trust in God, and moments where he doubts and questions God.

With that, God enters the conversation as a storm and doesn't offer an answer but context. God asks if Job could possibly understand the detail and complexity of the universe the way that God does. God then shows Job two beasts, beautiful and loved just as they are wild and dangerous – the point being that from Job's small lens, God looks unjust, but through the huge, multi-layered lenses of God, there's so much more going on, there's so much more to God's wisdom than our individual experiences. Something as beautiful as life can also be dangerous. Both can be true.

This is where today's text comes in: Job has not been given a reason for why he suffers, because there isn't one – he's not meant to suffer even though he does. Job is humbled by this wisdom, he says:

*"I know you can do anything;*

*no plan of yours can be opposed successfully.*

*You said, "Who is this darkening counsel without knowledge?"*

*I have indeed spoken about things I didn't understand,*

*wonders beyond my comprehension."*

Job is acknowledging his smallness, but then he says something truly profound:

*“You said, “Listen and I will speak;  
I will question you and you will inform me.”*

*My ears had heard about you,  
but now my eyes have seen you.  
Therefore, I relent and find comfort  
on dust and ashes.”*

The story ends with God saying that his friends were wrong, and he was right in his doubt and questioning, instead of turning to over-simplified, problematic solutions to such a big issue like suffering.

*“I’m angry at you and your two friends because you haven’t spoken about me correctly as did my servant Job. So now, take seven bulls and seven rams, go to my servant Job, and prepare an entirely burned offering for yourselves. Job my servant will pray for you, and I will act favorably by not making fools of you because you didn’t speak correctly, as did my servant Job.”*

With that, Job is restored everything two-fold, but we know this is not a reward, as God just made the point that Job didn’t lose those things as a punishment. Instead, God offers Job a gift even amid his suffering.

I mean, how could that NOT be one of your favorite books of the bible?

But from looking at that as a whole – you can see where I’m getting at. We often affiliate questioning is disbelief and that’s just not the case. If anything, questioning, debating, even doubting, are essential parts of having faith.

What is one of the biggest questions when it comes to religion and faith? “Why would God allow people to suffer?” – And it’s a good question! When we approach the Wisdom Literature, we can approach the conflicting texts together as a lesson of: sometimes things go well, sometimes things go horribly, and we don’t know everything but God wants all the dialogue and asking we can muster. It does help us grow and mature in faith. When we engage with scripture, it’s not just with faith but it’s also with intellect.

German-American Philosopher, Paul Tillich once said, “Being religious means asking passionately the question of the meaning of our existence and being willing to receive answers, even if the answers hurt.”

The answer Job got? – Because it happens. Scripture offers us a lot of things to question: language that sounds like God inflicting suffering, Genocide, the treatment of women, the exclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons, to name a few. Even for those who argue for the literalism and infallibility of

scripture don't follow it to a "T" – Luke 14 says, "In the same way, none of you who are unwilling to give up all of your possessions can be my disciple." – Not many of those walking around then – is there?

As Methodists, we have an entire Article of Religion on how we do not believe that scripture is necessarily without errors – but we DO believe that scripture is a bridge to salvation. What does that mean?

The late Rachel Held Evans offers a thought, she writes:

*"If you are looking for verses with which to support slavery, you will find them. If you are looking for verses with which to abolish slavery, you will find them. If you are looking for verses with which to oppress women, you will find them. If you are looking for verses with which to liberate or honor women, you will find them. If you are looking for reasons to wage war, you will find them. If you are looking for reasons to promote peace, you will find them. If you are looking for an out-dated, irrelevant ancient text, you will find it. If you are looking for truth, believe me, you will find it. This is why there are times when the most instructive question to bring to the text is not "what does it say?", but "what am I looking for?" I suspect Jesus knew this when he said, "ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened." If you want to do violence in this world, you will always find the weapons. If you want to heal, you will always find the balm."*

Even more important than asking the question? – knowing what is it that you're looking for. She goes on to say, "I have come to regard with some suspicion those who claim that the Bible never troubles them. I can only assume this means they haven't actually read it."

Job didn't understand what was happening, knew that his friend's assessments of him were wrong, even at times blamed God for being unfair – and that ultimately brought him closer to God than he had ever been. It's not about finding answers, it's about the questions we ask.

Are we looking to God's Word to become closer with our neighbor, or to prove our neighbor wrong? For every, "but scripture says..." argument, there's a counter scripture for it. I bet we've all ended up in that loop at some point. Honestly, that's some of the brilliance about it. When we open it, the Bible becomes a mirror of sorts, reflecting back at us the question, "why are we here? What does that say about us?"

Henry Drummond, a Scottish biologist once said, "Christ never failed to distinguish between doubt and unbelief. Doubt is 'Can't believe.' Unbelief is 'Won't believe.' Doubt is honest. Unbelief is obstinacy. Doubt is looking for light. Unbelief is being content with the darkness."

When we open scripture, when we doubt and question and wrestle with it – are we looking for light? Because we will find it. Are we listening for coins, or for a cricket?