

The Spirituality of the Blues

Job 19:23-27

Sermon by Mark Schloneger

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*“O that my words were written down!
O that they were inscribed in a book!
O that with an iron pen and with lead
they were engraved on a rock forever!
For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;
and after my skin has been thus destroyed,
then in my flesh I shall see God,
whom I shall see on my side,
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.
My heart faints within me! (Job 19:23-27, NRSV)*

([Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out](#), Bessie Smith)¹

Nobody knows you when you're down and out. That song is by Bessie Smith, nicknamed The Empress of the Blues, one of the most popular blues singers of the 1920's and 30's.

I listened to the blues as I prepared this message. That's because I think the blues makes the perfect soundtrack for most of the book of Job. The blues originated in southern black communities after the Civil War as former slaves faced the awesome burden of being freed to live in a society that was built on their racist exploitation.

In his book, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*,² author James Cone describes how the spirituals and the blues are like two sides of the same coin. The African-American spirituals are slave songs. The spirituals proclaim hope in the justice and righteousness of God even in the midst of unjust suffering. And they fill our hymnbooks. When Israel was in Egypt's land. This little light of mine. Swing low, sweet chariot. Wade in the water. Let us break bread together. Guide my feet. Steal away. There is a balm in Gilead. And there are many others. They fill our hymnbooks because the Bible contains the messages that they proclaim.

But the blues, “the blues are a poor man's heart disease,” as the late Howard University professor and poet Sterling Brown put it. They are the flip side of the spirituals. The blues force you to look at the suffering, the pain, and the brokenness, and refuse to let you turn away from them. Look at me, they say. Listen to me. The problem of suffering is not some philosophical question for Sunday School classrooms or a twenty-minute sermon. It's my reality. It's my life.

¹ Bessie Smith, “Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out.” Words and music by Jimmie Cox (Sony, 2003). YouTube, accessed November 8, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zea-1Fzi9JQ>

² James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972).

The thing is, though our hymnbooks contain no blues songs, the Bible contains their message, too. If you read through the Psalms, you may well conclude that David was the first blues man.

James Cone writes that the “blues are an expression of fortitude in the face of a broken existence.”³ They proclaim the will to be -- to be seen, to be heard, to be acknowledged -- in the face of all the dehumanizing forces at work in our world today: in racist criminal justice systems, in degrading immigration detention centers, in exploitative economic practices, in a cost-prohibitive health care system and sadly, in a church that struggles to welcome all people regardless of their race, ethnicity, sexual identity, gender, and economic class.

When Moses asked God about the name he should use to refer to God, God responded with Yahweh, meaning I am who I am, or I will be who I will be. The Great I Am gave us the will to be, and the blues proclaim the realities of people struggling to be – to be seen, to be heard, to be acknowledged – as human beings in the midst of profound suffering.

That was the situation of the people of Israel held in Babylonian captivity, the time when Job was probably written. How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?, they wondered. (Psalm 137:4) This time of exile brought Israel’s faith into crisis, and Job’s author wasn’t interested in the usual answers. Instead of asking, “How can I make sense of my suffering in light of God’s justice and righteousness,” Job asked, “What does the reality of my suffering say about the God who is?” It’s the blues, the flip side of the spirituals.

After Job lost his property, family, health, and dignity, his friends sat with him. For seven days, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar sat with Job in silence. When Job tore his robe in grief, they tore their robes in grief. When Job sat down in the ashes, Job’s friends covered themselves with dirt. Together, they sat on the ground for seven days and seven nights. And no one said a word, for “they saw that Job’s suffering was too great for words.” (Job 2:13) Have you run into situations like that? Sometimes, the most profound thing you can do when someone is in pain is simply to be present. And when you don’t know what to say, then say nothing.

But when Job broke his silence and gave words to his pain, his friends fled. Oh, they were still with him, in physical presence, but they fled from Job’s pain. They moved quickly to bring interpretations – so that everyone could get just on with things, to leave this behind. God punishes those who pursue evil, said one. God disciplines those he loves to make them stronger, said another. With God, things turn out for the best, said a third.

You know, I think Scripture can support everything those friends told him. God does work in those ways. It wasn’t so much that the content of what they said was wrong, it was that they applied mere religious content to a situation that they were unwilling to continue to share. That made their words hollow, distant, even untrue. When they opened their mouths, they closed that sacred circle of shared grief. Their words distanced them from Job’s pain, and they

³ Ibid., 236.

were offered more to address their own discomfort than Job's. And that left Job feeling utterly alone.

Nobody knows you when you're down and out.

I can understand why Job's friends responded in the way they did. It takes strength, courage and perseverance to sit with a person in pain for any extended period of time. That's because the pain, grief, and suffering of another forces us to address our own inadequacies and helplessness. This person looks up to me, and I can't fix it. This person has come to me, but it's beyond my power to do anything about. This person needs to make sense of things, but I don't know what to say. Sometimes, our responses become driven not by a desire to bear one another's burdens but to meet our need to help, to satisfy our need to be needed. And once we do that, we no longer share the pain of the pained.

Listen to Job. In chapter 6, he says, "Do you think your words are convincing when you disregard my cry of desperation?" (Job 6:26, NLT) And then, in chapter 13, he says, "You are smearing me with lies. As doctors, you are worthless quacks. Please be quiet! That's the smartest thing you could do. Listen to my charge, pay attention to my arguments." (Job 13:4-6, NLT) In other words, look at me. Listen to me. Let me be. Acknowledge me as a human being and not a caricature of someone needing help.

There is hope in Job, just as I think there's hope in the blues. The blues provide hope because the nature of songs is to be shared, and shared pain begins the long, slow slog of hope. It's not the soaring hope that will move you, inspire you. It's more a developing hope.

As Job wrestles with his immense loss, hope slowly emerges – not as a quick sign from God, but out of the process of a long-term struggle, marked by fits and starts rather than a continuous progression. It's the stuff found in the ground where he sits, mixed in with his sweat and his blood. There is hope in the capacity to live, to be, to give voice to the reality of pain without succumbing to it.

I take you back to chapter 3, where Job describes his pain to his friends. He is bitter. He is angry. He feels that God has rejected him and that his friends have abandoned him. He curses his life, and asks God to just leave him alone. He is about as low as you can go – seemingly in despair. In chapter 7, he repeatedly asks God to leave him alone. To just go. He wants to go.

But then, something curious happens. In his sad situation, he imagines that there would be one way out. He knows that he can't win a court case against God. "God is not a mortal like me, so I cannot argue with him or take him to trial", he says. (Job 9:32) If only there were a mediator who could bring us together. I know there is none. But let's just say there was, then the mediator could make God stop beating me, and I would no longer live in terror. Then I could speak to him without fear, something I could not do with my own strength.

No one can sustain hope in isolation. In *The Wounded Healer*, Henry Nouwen wrote that “the emptiness of the past and future can never be filled with words but only by the presence of a human being. Because then and only then can hope be born, that there might be one exception to the isolation – a hope that will make them whisper – “Maybe, after all, there is someone waiting for me.”

Nobody knows you when you’re down and out, but “maybe, after all, there is someone waiting for me.”

“If mortals die, can they live again?” Job asks in chapter 14. “Now, that would give me hope, and through my struggle I would eagerly wait for release. You would call and I would answer, and you would yearn for me, your handiwork. For then you would count my steps, instead of watching for my sins. My sins would be sealed in a pouch, and you would cover over my iniquity.”

Nobody knows you when you’re down and out. But “maybe, after all, there is someone waiting for me.”

No one can sustain hope in utter isolation. In this life, we will experience circumstances that will cause us pain, that will threaten to overwhelm us, to kill us. This has been a hard year for many of us, I know. Maybe there are specific reasons. Grief. Concerns for loved ones. Job losses. Or maybe it’s a just a foreboding sense of things that seem to be slipping away. It’s okay to sing the blues. There is a place for lament in our practice of faith, and no one can sustain hope in utter isolation.

Yet, know this: In Jesus Christ, God has come into this world to assure us that we are never alone – that there is no place that we could go to escape from God’s presence. And, the Spirit empowers us to be Christ’s presence for others who find themselves alone, isolated. We are not to blink and to flee from this suffering and pain, we are to dwell with it as Christ dwells with us. And maybe not so much with our words but in our presence, we will be the answer to the fleeting thought of others, of our world, “Maybe, after all, there is someone waiting for me.”

In his suffering, Job spoke with confidence of things that surpassed what he understood.

Job, chapter 19. “Oh that my words could be written. Oh, that they could be inscribed on a monument, carved with an iron chisel and filled with lead, engraved forever in rock.” “But as for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and that he will stand upon the earth at last. And after my body has decayed, yet in my body I will see God! I will see him for myself. Yes, I will see him with my own eyes. I am overwhelmed at the thought!

Nobody knows you when you’re down and out, but there is someone waiting for us after all.

Grounded hope comes from the blues, and it looks like Jesus.

And so, para todos que son amados por Dios y llamados para ser santos, there is grace and peace for you through God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. To all who are loved by God and called to be saints, hay gracia y paz para ustedes a través de Dios nuestro padre y del Señor Jesucristo.