



**From the Pulpit: October 2, 2022**

The Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time—World Communion Sunday

**The Reverend Christine V. Hides**

Job 33:12–33

*The Wizard of Uz, V: Elihu*

This is the fifth in the sermon series on the *Book of Job* that Bill and I are preaching this fall, about a faithful man from the land of Uz, who loses everything. In Job’s story of deep grief and loss, we meet a parade of characters. Last week we met his friends who manage to do just the right thing, sit beside him quietly, before they blow it. For chapter after chapter they offer their hurtful encouragement and damaging theology.

God bless Job, even as he sits on the ash heap of what was once his prosperous life, he musters the energy to push back against his friends. He cries out with a broken hallelujah, praising God, and lamenting his underserved fate. He demands to have his day in court with God. Today we meet a new character. Elihu is a young man who, depending on your perspective, is either full of hot air, or is a youthful breath of fresh air. I’m reading parts of chapter 33 from the Message translation today because it sounds closest to what I imagine Elihu sounds like as he interjects into the argument.

“Elihu has found the spiritual boomerang: The reason Job suffers is because Job is not blameless.”

*“But let me tell you, Job, you’re wrong, dead wrong!  
God is far greater than any human.  
So how dare you haul him into court,  
and then complain that he won’t answer your charges?  
God always answers, one way or another,  
even when people don’t recognize his presence.*

*“In a dream, for instance, a vision at night,...  
Or, God might get their attention through pain,  
by throwing them on a bed of suffering,*

...  
*They hang on the cliff-edge of death,*

*knowing the next breath may be their last.*  
...  
*“But even then an angel could come,  
a champion—there are thousands of them!—  
to take up your cause,  
A messenger who would mercifully intervene,  
canceling the death sentence with the  
words:  
‘I’ve come up with the ransom!’  
Before you know it, you’re healed,  
the very picture of health!  
...  
“This is the way God works.  
Over and over again  
He pulls our souls back from certain de-  
struction  
so we’ll see the light—and live in the  
light!  
“Keep listening, Job.  
Don’t interrupt—I’m not finished yet.  
But if you think of anything I should know, tell me.  
There’s nothing I’d like better than to see your name cleared.*

**I**n a series of short videos, stage four cancer survivor and author Kate Bowler offers her thoughts on a jar full of sayings offered to those who face grave illness. “Can I give you a hug? May I bring you a meal this week?” and “Did you watch the bachelorette?” receive her approval. Other common, well-meaning sentiments don’t fare so well. She harshest critique is for the phrase that also happens to be the title of her first memoir: “Everything happens for a reason.” “Reasons are weapons,” she says this while she unpacks why humans are wired to find a cause for suffering and evil. Bowler describes this need to find a cause as a “spiritual boomerang,” “because then, ta da, we will solve the problem.”

And so we approach Elihu with empathy and skepticism. There's nothing he wants more than to see his friend's name cleared. Now emboldened by certainty and frustration that brews into anger while waiting for the elders to finish their droning arguments, he's intent on setting everyone straight.

Elihu has found the spiritual boomerang: The reason Job suffers is because Job is not blameless. It is Job's fault. He must have done something to warrant all that has befallen him, because no one is truly innocent. Then Elihu spends five chapters telling us just how right he thinks he is. Can you just imagine Job, holding on to faith by his fingernails while this know-it-all keeps going on and on?

In this sermon series we've been asking hard questions about evil and suffering. Bethany Sollereder's book *Why is There Suffering: Pick Your Own Theological Adventure* has been helping me find my way through the tangled arguments. Each chapter starts with a question and ends with a set of decisions. For example, Chapter 1 asks what God is like? If you decide you want to follow the "God is good" path, go to chapter 2. If God exists but does not love us, turn to page 36, and if you want to explore the idea that God doesn't exist at all, go to page 41. It is a strangely effective way to write a book on suffering. Instead of one right answer or spiritual boomerang, the book's format reveals that suffering is a messy mystery, one that each of us must unravel for ourselves. She's created a map, of sorts. And if you don't buy the reason for suffering you arrive at, you can retrace your steps and try another route.

When we follow Elihu's argument using Sollereder's path, it leads to chapter 24. God uses suffering to teach us lessons. "Our souls," Sollereder says, "are exercised by suffering like our bodies are exercised by weights and treadmills. The training is not pleasant, but it is necessary."<sup>1</sup>

Elihu puts it another way: There are three ways God's wisdom is revealed to us. God might come in dreams to

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<sup>1</sup> Sollereder, Bethany. *Why is There Suffering: Pick Your Own Theological Adventure*, page 68.

warn us, God might "throw us on a bed of suffering," or God could bring us a friend, like Elihu, to tell us we are dead wrong.

There are strong feelings about Elihu's second suggestion that God throws us on a bed of suffering. You either, like Calvin and Aquinas, agree that suffering as a divine teaching tool seems like a logical way for the God of love to teach us how to be better humans. Or you are

"A rare friend who believes your story when no one else does can make all the difference."

wary of this line of thinking because it sounds a lot like a "spare the rod spoil the child" parenting philosophy used to justify all sorts of abuse. I'm in the wary camp, along with the positive parenting proponents and the pediatricians. The American Academy of Pediatrics takes a firm stance against aversive strategies, including all forms of corporal punishment and yelling at or shaming children. These strategies are not effective in the long term. In fact corporal punishment increases the

risk for negative behavioral, cognitive, psychosocial, and emotional outcomes for children.<sup>2</sup> Science says punitive suffering isn't a good teacher.

Wise people in my life are fond of pointing out that two things can be true at the same time. It can be true that suffering is not the will or intentional teaching tool of a merciful, loving God who desires the flourishing of creation. And it can also be true that people do often look back and see lessons learned in the pain. Another growth opportunity, you might say when you've gotten through the storm.

Elihu, he's **mostly, but not entirely** wrong.

What Elihu gets right is the need for God's gift of friendship. Not a friend to convince you you are wrong, but a one in a million friend, an angel, or advocate who will intervene on your behalf, to save you from the depths, who brings you back from the brink. Do you know that friend who believes you and will stand by you through anything?

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<sup>2</sup> Jenkins, Cameron. "The American Academy of Pediatrics on Spanking Children: Don't Do It, Ever." NPR.org, November 11, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/11/666646403/the-american-academy-of-pediatrics-on-spanking-children-dont-do-it-ever>

Anthony Graves<sup>3</sup> spent 18 years in jail, twelve of them on death row in Texas, because of a wrongful conviction. The case was so badly mishandled that the prosecutor was disbarred. Graves remembered friends and loved ones who helped him to survive the inhumane conditions. Fellow death row inmates who passed him books and ramen packets. Pen pals around the world who brought publicity to his case. And an attorney named Nicole Casarez who believed in his innocence and fought for his release. “If it hadn’t been for her,” Graves says “I wouldn’t be breathing today.”<sup>4</sup>

Now Graves is a friend to others who need someone to believe them. Through his foundation he helps other wrongfully convicted persons find attorneys. He established a reentry program for those returning from incarceration, and created a speakers bureau for people to tell their stories of the criminal justice system.

A rare friend who believes your story when no one else does can make all the difference. Recently I spoke with someone whose views were becoming more and more inclusive and welcoming, especially around who belongs in church and at the communion table. I couldn’t help but ask how this drastic change of heart and mind came about. “It seems very simple,” they said, “I just decided to believe people’s stories. When someone tells me about their experience of racism, or homophobia, I believe them.” Step one in becoming an advocate: believe peoples’ stories of suffering.

Step 2: Keep showing up. Kate Bowler, or Anthony Graves, or Job, or anyone whose suffering that has no identifiable cause will tell you that a friend who arrives with a letter, or a casserole, or a listening ear, or a hug will help you keep breathing through the worst.

You saw the folks in Florida and the Carolinas, showing up in the chaos left by the hurricane. Amidst so much loss, friends and neighbors know that showing up to save a cat, or to offer a ride through a flooded street on a jet ski, or to help you sift through the ruins to salvage what treasures you can—is better than a boatful of empty platitudes. The one in a million friends will keep showing up, long after the headlines have moved on.

“a friend who arrives with a letter, or a casserole, or a listening ear, or a hug will help you keep breathing through the worst.”

God can be this friend too, yes? The challenge of Job is that it begins with this scene where God and the adversary make a deal and so we are forced to decide if this is really how we imagine God or it is an imperfect literary device. But here in Elihu’s speech we find familiar words for God: advocate, messenger, champion, the one who pulls us back from the brink over and over again.

Kate Bowler’s second memoir is titled *There’s No Cure for Being Human and Other Truths I Need to Hear*. With the wisdom gained from going through the storm and back she says, “Someday we won’t need hope. Someday we

won’t need courage. Time itself will be wrapped in a bow, and God will draw us all into the eternal moment where there will be no suffering, no disease, no email. Until then we are stuck with our beautiful, terrible finitude... Our lives are not problems to be solved. We can have meaning, and beauty and love, but nothing even close to resolution.”

This is the mystery. Multiple things can be true at the same time: God is good. Suffering is real. It might teach us something. It might not. But a good friend, who believes us, who loves us, who shows up no matter what will make all the difference. May we know that friend. May we be that friend.

<sup>3</sup> Graves, Anthony, *Infinite Hope: How Wrongful Conviction, Solitary Confinement, and 12 Years on Death Row Failed to Kill My Soul*.

<sup>4</sup> <https://law.utexas.edu/news/2014/06/18/alumni-awards-2014/>

**—The Eucharistic Prayer—**  
**The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg**

God of the Universe, at the dawn of creation, your Spirit breathed on the waters, making them the wellspring of all holiness. You created the oceans and rivers, and all that dwell within them, and at your word the wind and the waves were born.

The seasons follow your plan, and the tides rise and fall on your command. In both calm and storm, you are with us.

Our spirits are crushed when we see hurricane wreckage in Florida and elsewhere. Our prayer is that you will intervene for repair and wholeness with your strength and wisdom.

We dare to pray that you'll bring shelter to the homeless, water to the thirsty, nourishment to the hungry, power to the powerless, hope for the hopeless, comfort for the disconsolate, and respite for the grieving.

God, thank you for the skilled helpers who've so quickly swooped in to fix things—paramedics and fire fighters and electric line people and machinery operators and delivery drivers and helicopter pilots and sailors to ferry goods when bridges are out, and that good friend who is quick to help when we are in trouble. Strengthen them and lift them up from their weariness.

In all things and in all times, help us to remember that even when life seems dark and stormy, you are in the boat with us, guiding us to safety.

Gracious God, pour out your Holy Spirit upon us and upon these your gifts of bread and wine, that the bread we break and the cup we bless may be the communion of the body and blood of Christ.

Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,

all glory and honor are yours, eternal God, now and forever. Amen.

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