

October 27, Ordinary 30B (Job 42:1-6, 10-17)

Job passively endures a lot of trauma before he finally speaks directly to God about it. That's the turning point.

by [Meghan Murphy-Gill](#) in the [October 2024](#) issue

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I asked my therapist if she was familiar with the book of Job. She laughed. “Everyone is familiar with the book of Job,” she said.

Job's theme, the absurdity of suffering and our human quest to grasp its cause and meaning, is certainly universal. Perhaps it should be required reading for anyone tasked with helping people understand and make meaning of their personal suffering—for therapists, spiritual directors, chaplains, and pastors alike.

If only its ending did not skirt explanation, or at least consolation, for those whose lives are not mysteriously restored as Job's is. The end of the story might be less satisfying without the last eight verses. But if we were to really lean into the authenticity of what human suffering is like for most people, Job could end before this week's reading, with God's response to Job questioning the meaning of it all.

I never claim to speak on behalf of God, but people come to me as a pastor to try to make meaning of their suffering. Their stories take my breath away. Like Job, who comes to God in great faith, those I minister to seek God despite their trauma, when they could just as easily conclude that God is uninterested in their personal lives or deny God's existence altogether. Like Job, they continue to seek God when they could easily seek relief or meaning by other means.

Unlike Job, though, most who seek my counsel do not go directly to God. They don't demand answers in prayers to the one who laid the foundation of the earth. I know this, because I ask. “How did God respond when you said that?” is a go-to question of mine. I don't really expect an answer. I ask this question because I think it's worth

pointing out to them the faith they bring with them when they come to me, a pastor and priest and not a therapist. I am not there to uncover patterns of trauma and trauma responses, as a therapist might. I am someone who can comfort the afflicted and point toward God in this role, and so I often invite direct encounters with God in prayer. I've stopped being surprised at how often I hear in response, "Well, I haven't tried that."

If we are to have the faith of Job, shouldn't we who suffer speak directly to God about it? If the book of Job is about human suffering, it is also about the ways we make meaning out of it. Yes, there are those who see suffering as the effect of some cause, as Job's so-called friends do. Job passively endures a lot of trauma before he finally speaks directly to God about it. That's what makes the difference. That's the turning point in this book. And God replies.

In this week's passage, we hear Job's response to God's laundry list of things no creature, only the Creator, can understand. Although God has demanded that Job do the listening while God speaks, answering Job by redirecting with God's own questions, Job is not quieted. Job answers God, again showing up and expressing great faith: "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me that I did not know."

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Job's recognition of his lack of understanding is different from a shrugging emoji or saying, "It is what it is." There is some satisfaction here as he acknowledges, unlike his friends with their trite answers, that he is indeed not God but created by God.

Still, in verses 10-17 it is unclear what Job is being rewarded for: For taking his complaints to God? For repenting for this? For praying for his once fortunate, now humiliated friends? Perhaps the restoration of Job's worldly fortunes is not the point. Job dies "old and full of days." Full of fortune by way of livestock but also by way of family and presumably friends, as rather than trying to make sense of their suffering he offers it back to God by way of prayer.

One thing I've learned in years of therapy is that no amount of understanding the personal traumas of my own life will ever change them. Talking with a therapist does not undo the lasting effects of the hurts of the past. It doesn't really soothe the pain. Recognizing my own patterns and all the potential causes and effects in my life will

not even reliably prevent future traumas. But speaking about them—saying them out loud—is an act of faith that suffering isn't what God intended for my life. And doing so provides some much-needed perspective about my own human condition: I am not God, so I have little power over which way the wind blows.