

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

By Burt L. Burleson

“Up From the Ashes”

*The last in a four-part series entitled,
Community that Enables a Journey*

Job 42

October 29, 2006

Jacob Needleman wrote, “... there are levels of Christianity. Failure to understand what this means has led to the distortion of the Christian teaching, with all that that implies in the collective history of Western civilization.” (Lost Christianity, p 155)

Levels???? That sounds downright “Un-American,” doesn’t it? That’s sort of hard to say in church, isn’t it? That we’re at different places in a journey????

Well... we are. A healthy faith story moves through stages... they aren’t certain or set, really... Not even predictable, necessarily. But I do think we can know and anticipate some things... and should, especially if we want to be the sort of community that helps people move along. It helps to know that there are movements to expect and identifiable stages.

There are lots of us... in this, sort of “moderate Baptist” world... who have shrunk the whole thing down to two stages. In our minds, there’s fundamentalism and freedom. Legalism and grace. Some of you won’t like what I’m about to say... but I promise you I’m right... That’s just wrong.

The truth is that any and every stage can be a place of freedom and can be a place of slavery. And it’s always that way. Remember Israel?

Egypt was salvation... then it was bondage.

The desert was deliverance... then slavery.

Forty years they wandered.

And the Law... Jerusalem... the Temple... first it was a great blessing and then it was bondage to them. Paul said, “**It was death.**”

So... what at one point in the journey is something setting you free... can become later, the very thing holding you back. Your last great spiritual breakthrough can become your greatest hurdle. (R. Rohr)

Every stage of faith has its pitfalls... and the real problems come when we don’t keep moving. Job moves.

He begins, as we’ve said, with a container, in a container. He is given a solid foundation. He was taught what the community believed and they gave it to him, without stuttering.

It’s what we all need and if we aren’t given it, we’ll have to go back and pick it up later. A core... simple... clear and true... And we as a community must impart this.

Now... my sense is that most religious institutions spend most of their time doing this and doing this well. They convict... they teach... they call. Especially more-conservative churches... they do this well. They give a faith identity.

More liberal churches, quite frankly, have failed to do this. ... Because they tend to be ambivalent about their core.... and proud of it.

Richard Rohr says, that to really be on a journey of faith, most people have to start conservative. So... we need to be clear as a community and unwavering... and create a container.

But the thing of it is... The container will not be enough. The answers won't all add up.
 We'll have our doctrine ducks in a row,
 Our beliefs all certain,
 Our prayers all said...

And life can still go to hell in a hand basket. Just like it did for Job.

Usually, the transition out of that beginner's faith involves some suffering. Not always, but usually... internally, emotionally... externally, some crisis. You'll just be looking at life and listening to your prayers and you'll be saying, "but mom still died."

Or... the children, innocents across the world... are suffering and you'll say, "**can someone please tell me where God is?**"

Or you'll meet a beautiful, whole human being who doesn't believe like you do. There'll be some event and catalyst... and you'll step through a door and into a wrestling match with God. Or worse, maybe it'll just feel like a blank place and God's nowhere to be found. Silence.

And when that happens you'll need a community who can understand... and who knows you must go there and be there. You'll need people of faith around you who are also honest and authentic and who know this can't be fixed...

Not by platitudes...

Or by theology...

Or rationality...

Remember how Job's friends tried and miserably failed and how they were in trouble with God and had to repent of their arrogant sin. Trust me... you don't have the answer to this. But the One living within you does...

So we must be open.... And patient... real... graceful. If we're not, folks will punt and so many have... When the community around them cannot acknowledge what is real.

Job has no one... but in spite of that... moves beyond this angry, painful, longing... into a sort of rest. He "**repents**" he says. Really, it's not just being sorrowful... but surrendered... there in the ashes... to what is.

And it happens because of a kind of knowing that he comes to. "**My eyes see now.**" It's direct and deep. Some part of him has awakened to something, a mystery, beyond him.

As a community... we should understand that the ways in which we help at this point are not programmatic. In fact, it's only in stage one, that our role can be programmed. It's church training... catechism... youth camp and the like.

In these later stages, it's different. We embody something as individuals... but more importantly as a community. We embody the sacred.

We point beyond us... to what is transcendent.

And we move together into holy places and times.

And we let ourselves be moved... be awed.

It's some real contact with God that moves us on... and Job has moved on and he's taken into another stage of life and faith. And I think this is the best part of the story. Not because Job gets all his stuff back but because Job has become the priest.

"Take seven bulls and seven rams" (usually one would do... this is a pretty serious sin... the arrogance of speaking for God)... **"take your sacrifice to Job and make your burnt offering there and let Job pray for you and if he does then I'll let you off the hook for being such bozos."**

(Bozos... that's from the NLRWIV... the New Living Really With It Version.)

Job, having made this journey, is now in a certain position between the world and God. It's a post. And it's not one he applies for... It comes to him. The redemptive work of his life comes to him as a result of his journey.

There's no saying yes or no. This is where he is now.

In between... at the intersection of the vertical and the horizontal. He is receiving the sacrifice and offering prayers to God and he is the one communing grace on God's behalf. He's praying for his enemies... **"Father, forgive them."** (Sound familiar?)

There's a flow...

Prayers to heaven...

And Grace from heaven...

All going through Job. He is a Saint who is now something on behalf of and for the world. That's where the journey will take us if we stay on it. To the work that is ours to do.

And we're asking again, what kind of community must we be to help with that and I'm thinking at this stage, there's no real answer. This is work of the Divine that is going on far beyond our awareness.

All we can do, I think, is watch for it and be glad in it.... Because saints are going to come our way... They already have...

Some of you... and you probably being a saint have no idea of this... Make who we are and what happens here possible.

You know how the Celtic Christians talk about thin places... that's what you are... Thin. You're standing on the border between the divine and the human and you are mediating. Our pain is flowing through you to God and God's mercy is pouring to us through your good heart.

You've been placed in a post... an intermediate post. You didn't ask for it and maybe aren't even aware of it... but it's true.

And you... and Job... become for us, beacons. **"Here's what it can be like... Here's what you can be. Like this... this at peace... this full of blessing and truth."**

I think... God will take us there... if we keep saying yes. We'll be given the work we're to do. We won't choose it...

It's beyond our controlling...

We'll be surrendered at that stage...

Remember Jesus' last words to Peter. **"When you were young, you pretty much went where you wanted to go (you were in control). When you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go."**

Jesus isn't doing crystal ball gazing about Peter's future back problems and Alzheimer's. He's telling us all about the spiritual pattern.

When we're surrendered, life comes to us and we stop trying to control it. The work we must do will choose us. And it may involve more suffering and suffering on behalf of... Hebrews says Jesus was made perfect that way... why not us?

Who knows what it'll be...

Some life that is yours to bear. A person... maybe someone in your family. You'll be standing between them and God... sorrow and love flowing back and forth through you.

Maybe it'll be a place...

A cause...

A ministry...

You won't get to choose it, remember. And being surrendered as you are, perhaps you won't even be all that conscious of what all will be taking place through you. But it will happen, if you stay on this journey.

And we'll be...

The world will be...

Better for it.

There's one last thing with the story, isn't there? Job getting all his camels and kids back. ... Beauty pageant winners even.

And did you notice these daughters get an inheritance too... unheard of in that ancient male-dominated culture. Mature people of faith aren't so bound by custom. As one teacher says, **"Learn the law perfectly so you'll know how to break it appropriately."**

I don't know why the story ends this way...

Maybe just to remind us all that at some point, after we've lost... life will go on. Job doesn't get to sit in ashes forever. There are camels to feed and children to love and you can't do that in sackcloth.

Jesse Jordan says the ending is important because Job has to learn to trust and receive again. You can't receive a gift from someone you resent and have at arms length.

Or is this ending here because around camp fires and in Sunday School classes the inspired writer of this play wants us to keep arguing and wrestling with it? Don't assume all scripture is there so you'll nod your head and say "amen." God, and God's people, may want it there so you'll say, **"hey, wait a minute."**

And in that spirit, do notice what comes next. If you turn your page, it's Psalm 1... where the Psalmist is saying, **"Blessed are those who do not walk in step with the wicked... whatever they do prospers."**

It's true, sort of... well, sometimes... But we just read a story where it wasn't. Job was not accidentally placed in the Canon before Psalm 1.

It's so the community will read Psalm 1 rightly... and so they'll be humble as they recite it and wise as they teach it. And that's where we end this series on Job. What kind of community must we be?

A humble and wise one...

A curious and convicted one...

Wide eyed... opened hearted...

Arguing and wrestling...

Surrendering and accepting...

Blessing... praying for the world.

O God... may we be all that. So much is at stake, we need this from one another and the world needs what we'll become because of it. And help us, God, to have some fun as it happens. Grant us the joy of our growing and becoming. In the name of the one who taught us all to pray, saying, "Our Father...."