



Ravensworth

BAPTIST CHURCH

October 27, 2024 | Ordinary Time
Job 42 | *Word to the Wise: Build Community!*
Rev. Dr. Leah Grundset Davis, preaching

For the last eight weeks, our series called “Word to the Wise” has knit us together within the wisdom book of the Bible. Does Proverbs feel like a lifetime ago? Remember Lady Wisdom in the streets calling out to all who might listen and inviting them to join her on the right paths? And of course, there was that other text from Proverbs 31 and its modern-day commentary from the Barbie movie. We dabbled in only the first chapter of Esther and witnessed Queen Vashti start a revolution for the ages with one simple word: No.

And for the last three weeks, this wisdom series gave us the book of Job. On World Communion Sunday, we heard from Rev. Dr. Ben Boswell in his Job sermon on suffering and grief, and those less-than-helpful friends of Job. Then last week, God met Job from the whirlwind and reminded him of who Job was, invited him into to power and beauty of creation, and God told Job there are no easy answers when it comes to suffering.

This week, we read from the very last chapter of Job, when Job and God have another conversation, this time, Job claiming a bit more of his voice, his place, and leading with some questions. It became clear to Job that his friends attempt at comfort through a binary kind of faith, offered no real help. And in their prescriptive theology, they missed out on the presence of God and the presence of being alongside Job in his pain.

They were so determined to have answers that they did not linger in the questions of faith. Because of Job's journey, he has been transformed—through his experience and through his conversations with God, which invited him into a world full of questions, creation, and awe. It is the same world where suffering and grief exist, and yet they exist alongside everything else and are not caused by God, not caused by Job. Everything doesn't wrap up neatly in the book of Job—questions remain: grief is real, Job is not the same person. If we attempt to wrap up the book, we have missed all the wisdom leaping from the pages.

I quoted Dr. Gustavo Gutierrez last week and will quote from him again this week from his commentary on Job. The world lost this giant in liberation theology this week as he died at the age of 96. Catholic priest, the founder of Latin American liberation theology, an advocate for the poor and suffering for they are the ones who know God—Gutierrez understood the book of Job in ways that most of us cannot.

Here is what he concludes about this final chapter of Job—

“What is it that Job has understood? That justice does not reign in the world God has created? No. The truth he has grasped and has taken him to the level of contemplation is that justice alone does not have the final say about how we are to speak with God. Only when we have come to realize that God's love is freely bestowed do we enter fully and definitively into the presence of the God of faith.

Grace is not opposed to the quest of justice nor does it play it down; on the contrary, it gives it its full meaning. God's love, like all true love, operates in a world not of cause and effect but of freedom and liberation.

We saw earlier, how in the debate with his friends, Job came to see that he must transcend his individual experiences. The dialogue brought home to him

that his situation was not exceptional, but was shared by the poor of this world. This new awareness in turn showed him that solidarity with the poor was required by his faith in God who has a special love for the disinherited, the exploited of human history.

This preferential love is the basis for what I have been calling the prophetic way of speaking about God— Job has experienced a shift—from a punishment view of history to the world of grace that completely enfolds and permeates him.”¹

If you had asked me what text would I like to preach on the Sunday we marked my five years as full-time solo pastor at RBC, I can promise you, Job would not have even been in the top 50. But the lectionary did the choosing this Sunday as we conclude the study of Job in the penultimate Sunday of our wisdom series.

Although, if you had asked me five years ago what these five years might have looked like—I couldn’t have predicted it. In these five years we had a pandemic where our world came undone and we were physically isolated, our friends and family and strangers got sick and died, and we adapted RBC to meet the challenges in structure and witness we now face. We’ve said final goodbyes to so many of our RBC Beloveds during these five years. I can think of so many memorial services in this room, on zoom, in our memorial garden, at Arlington National Cemetery, and other locations where we have grieved deeply and celebrated the lives of the saints who we were fortunate enough to know.

We’ve had Sunday worship services indoors, outdoors, as a drive-thru service, on zoom, on livestream, in the annex building, in the fellowship room, on Vimeo, and I am certain other ways too that I’m just not remembering right now.

¹ Gusta Gutierrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*. 87-88.

We've witnessed the utter pain and sorrow of our partners in Gaza, and Cuba and South Sudan. We've also chosen to bear witness to that pain, believing alongside one another that the witness of God's love must change the world. We are nearing the end of a five-year grant with the Alliance of Baptists called Thrive for Racial Justice, where we've committed to working to becoming an antiracist church and we recently received another grant to continue this congregational work around decolonizing worship.

If you can believe it, the staff has completely turned over in five years with retirements and new adventures, and we've welcomed incredibly gifted new members of the staff. Our children and youth Sunday School classes have operated differently for each of the last five years—meeting at different times, different ways, to make them the most accessible for our kids and youth and their families.

You blessed and supported me while I was on sabbatical last year, supporting the writing and award of a \$50,000 grant so we could share sabbatical and tap into what makes our heart sing. We've marched in parades and protests—because we do believe that BlackLivesMatter and the LGBTQ+ community deserves equal rights and that Palestine should be free, and that empire does not have the final say—because we are people who follow the Resurrected Christ—death did not have the final say!

We've visited in hospital rooms, and around kitchen tables, and over hot tea and coffee, with Swiss Bakery treats and homemade ones too. We've replaced an HVAC unit and repaved our parking lot so it can be a welcoming and safe space. And we continue having lively and faithful conversations about our very needy flat roof.

We've asked all the questions in Bible Study and offered what can only be called Christ's grace to one another when we've messed up or hurt each other. We put up a banner on the outside of the building with bright and bold words proclaiming: Love, Justice, Community for all. And: we mean it. We've welcomed new members into the congregation and celebrated baptisms and baby dedications.

We've laughed, we've cried, we've committed to peace and justice and the Way of Jesus every time we've met, and I think it's stuck most of the time! We've done so much more than this and been so much more than this, and I'm certain you will each come up to me afterward and mention what I forgot. I hope you do!

Is your head spinning? Do you feel like you're in God's whirlwind right now like Job? It's creative and it's powerful, but it can also make you a little dizzy and discombobulated. It's really something to mark a span of time like five years and list off all of these moments, and know there are hundreds more, but it's even more remarkable to be the kind of congregation that makes them possible.

If you've been around here for more than couple weeks or you've ever asked me what I love about this congregation, I always say "they live with a kind of holy curiosity that I've never seen anywhere else." It's a questioning kind of faith because RBC, you refuse to be bound by binary thinking, theology, or faith. You refuse to allow the easy answers to be the **only** answers.

You live and love deeply inside and outside of these walls. I find it most striking in our justice work— it takes a deep awareness of self to be curious. It requires vulnerability, a lack of defensiveness, and a truly mature approach to self and others. Some day I will some study around this idea of a curious congregation because I want to know what creates a space like that where Holy Spirit can

call us to something new and we meet the possibility with curiosity instead of all the reasons why we cannot do something. Your imagination grows and you welcome the expansion because who knows what might happen next when we're open to it.

A wise one among us, asked me last week "Why would Job be part of wisdom literature?" We laughed, and then we agreed that it was because there's not an answer in the book—it's a book of questions that invites us to live with curiosity and care.

I will never be able to fully put into words the last five years, so I will stop trying. I look forward to another five, but maybe the next five can be a little more boring? But not if that means we won't have the same levels of curiosity and care because that is exactly what makes this place buzz.

The wisdom of God is in the question-asking and the experience of the community that follows Jesus. In the words of Gutierrez, may we live into and boldly proclaim that this is the world of God's grace, that completely enfolds and permeates us.

May we boldly continue to follow God the Creator, Jesus the Redeemer, and Holy Spirit the Sustainer as we share love, do justice, and build community.

May it be so today, and every day. Amen.