Would you pray with me?

God of unending surprises,
This life is a tapestry of moments woven together, and we long to be weavers of love. Today we gather and pray that you would unravel our bias.
Unravel our assumptions.
Unravel whatever it is that keeps us from you.
And as you do, clear space in our hearts for your Word.
We are listening. We are praying.
Amen.

This morning we continue in our summer worship series, “Unraveled: Seeking God When Our Plans Fall A Part”. And every week we’ve reflected on a different biblical character that experienced an unraveling of some kind. Moses worked hard to unravel Pharaoh’s plans for injustice, Thomas unraveled our negative connotations surrounding doubt and grief, Ananais and Saul unraveled their lenses of hate and prejudice for one another with Christ’s love. This series has sought to uncover where God is in the midst of our spiraling and uncertainty….and to remind us that life rarely works out the way we hope it will.

Today, we are unpacking the story of Job. And in my opinion, you will be hard pressed to find another character in the Bible who experienced more unraveling than that poor guy did. Old Testament scholars like Walter Bruggemann assure us that the text of Job is simply dramatic fiction, part of a series of books know as the wisdom literature. The first book, Proverbs shows us that God is wise and just…that God has ordered the world as fair. The righteous are rewarded and the wicked are punished. Essentially, you get what you deserve. But the next book…Ecclesiastes, kind of flips that reasoning on it’s head. Ecclesiastes says the opposite… that people don’t always get what they deserve. That the world isn’t always fair, life is unpredictable and hard to comprehend just like smoke. And this makes us ask the question, “Is God wise and just? And this is the question that’s being explored in the final wisdom book of Job.

Job is written theatrically almost like a poetic Hebrew play. And the story begins in a heavenly court type of setting where God is with these angelic creatures bragging about his servant Job and how righteous he is. God goes on and one about what a devout and faithful follower he is and this causes one of the heavenly creatures the “ha’ satan” to approach God. That word “Ha Satan” is Hebrew for accuser, and he makes the argument that Job doesn’t actually love God, but he’s only a devout and faithful follower because God rewards Job. The Satan goes on to contend that if God were to take away all of the good things he gave to Job, then they would see his true colors. Now, Job was living every ancient near eastern guys dream. He had a loving wife, beautiful children, hard working servants, healthy livestock and fruitful land. And God agrees with the Satan to test Job, and gives the accuser permission to punish Job and take away every gift God has blessed him with. So, tragedy follows tragedy for the next few chapters of the book, and Job looses everything important to him: his wife, his family, his animals, his possessions, and even his health. Job is covered in skin sores and the only thing that God does not allow the Satan to do is take Job’s very life. This particular characterization of God is the reason I've really struggled with this book in the past. The God in this story is not the God I love and have a relationship with. One that allows their children to be a pawn in a cruel bet. One that sets up unfair games to punish their loved ones.

But what I’ve come to learn about the book of Job, is that the book is meant to be read as an outrageous tale, intended to disorient and reorient our way of thinking. Walter Bruggemann says that, “Job is designed to voice an alternative reality and to invite listening Israel to reimagine it’s explanation of reality, which had mostly gone uncriticized. Like all good theater, it is aimed at self-awareness that invites us to see our lives afresh from a new and different perspective.” And if you’ve been paying attention for the last few months, looking at familiar stories in Scripture with fresh new perspectives is exactly what we’ve been doing. Because, Israel believed what a lot of us believe….that if you do everything right, God will always reward you. They believed that the righteous should and will be blessed and the sinful will be cursed. But that ideology didn’t always align with our reality.

And so Job was placed in the Old Testament a part of the wisdom literature because it poses the questions people of faith have struggled with for centuries and will continue to struggle with. Questions like: Why do bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people? Where is God in the midst of our suffering? And if faith in God doesn’t protect us from suffering, what good is it anyway? We humans have always wanted answers to everything—especially for the pain in our lives. And whether we admit it or not, we want life to follow a formula. We want it to make sense. If we have enough faith, God should reward us with abundant blessings. If we treat our body like a temple, we should have a healthy and long life. If we work hard in our careers, we should always get promoted. If we stay positive and keep the faith, everything will work out just the way we want it to. And this kind of theology is known as “the prosperity gospel”. The prosperity gospel maintains that the Lord will give you health, wealth and happiness if you have strong faith, a solid prayer life, and always stay positive.

But the problem with the prosperity gospel, and following a formula for our lives is that it doesn’t leave room for seasons of suffering. It doesn’t allow us to live in the uncertainty. I think I can pretty confidently say that nothing has worked out the way it “should have” in 2020 according to the formula of health, wealth and happiness. And that’s why we all have a love-hate relationship with Job. Because it’s a painful reminder that sometimes everything in our lives comes unraveled and we’re left to pick up the pieces and try and make sense of it all. Making sense of suffering is something everyone strives to do. After Job looses everything, and yet remains faithful to God, his friends visit him and provide the worst comfort ever. Instead of giving him compassion, they just interrogate him for 20 chapters insisting that Job had to have committed some kind of horrible sin to deserve all that’s happened to him.

Have you ever gone through a tragedy or a trauma only to be met with your friends “explanations” that only made you feel worse and even more confused? Kate Bowler, author and professor at Duke Divinity is one of the world’s leading experts on the prosperity gospel and at age 35 she was diagnosed with stage four colon cancer….right after finishing a book called *Blessed*. And as much as she didn’t want to admit it, she hadn’t just been researching the prosperity gospel for many years…but that theology had seeped down into her soul that when her diagnosis came to her she thought, “This can’t be happening to me. I’m special. I am a faithful Christian. I have done nothing to deserve this.” And after writing an opt ed in the New York Times about how sometimes there is no explanation for why bad things happen to go people, thousands of people from all over the world responded to her with possible explanations and solutions and reasons for why she must have gotten colon cancer. People said things like, “God must have given you cancer because of an unconfessed sin in your life.” Or “God has given you this burden to bear to strengthen your character and faith.” Everyone needed Kate to understand that there had to be a simple solution…a reasonable explanation for what she was going through. But loved ones, rarely are things simple and easy to understand. Our lives are far too messy and complicated to be put in a box. And God is far too complex and mysterious to be put in a box.

And now, we come to chapter 28…our scripture passage for the morning. And it’s a beautiful poetic reading Job shares on the wisdom of God. And in my opinion, chapter 28 is the crux of the book of Job. Because I believe what chapter 28 is saying is that humans…wise and discerning as we might be at times… are not God. God’s ways are not our ways and wisdom is found in God and God alone. The truth is, we could spend the rest of eternity striving to unlock the mysteries of God and we would barely scratch the surface. God finally answers Job in chapter 38 of the book and shows him all the intricate detail that went into creation…all the magnificent splendor that goes into the day to day operations of the universe. So, maybe it’s a good thing that the story of Job dramatically unravels the prosperity gospel. Because I believe author of this book wants us to understand that some things in life are beyond our comprehension. The point of this story is to show us Job’s perspective and God’s perspective. From Job’s perspective, it looks like God is cruel and unjust, but from God’s perspective…we see that everything is infinitely bigger. God is dynamically interacting with a whole universe of complexity when He makes decisions and this is what God calls his wisdom.

For me, the story Job powerfully illustrates the role we are called to play when we come up against suffering. We aren’t asked to have all the answers—in our own pain or in the pain of others. But what we are called to do is sit with people and make space for their heartache. In Job 27, we see that his friends finally do what they should have been doing all along and they stop trying to make sense of his situation and they just sit with him and listen for seven days and seven nights. This is known in the Jewish religion today as “sitting shiva” where loved ones are asked to show up and make sacred space for individuals going through grief and suffering. We will never be able to comprehend the wisdom of God and the intricate details of the world…but what we can do is be there for the people in our lives when things come unraveled for them. Kate Bowler said the people who have provided the most comfort and healing have been the ones that wrote about their own suffering and reminded her that she wasn’t alone…that others with with her in her pain, and God was with her, too. Bowler went onto say that over and over, she would read people’s close calls and near death experiences, they all described the same strange phenomena: an inexplicable feeling of deep love. One man wrote Kate and said, “God was there in my suffering and an indescribable sense of peace came over me in that moment that changed me forever. I have no idea how this works, but I wish the same for you as you move forward.”

My prayer is that we would be the church that doesn’t swoop in, striving to provide answers and explanations for people’s suffering. I hope that we wouldn’t interrogate individuals on what they could have possibly done to deserve their heartache, like Job’s friends did. My prayer is that we would be the church that exhibits the ministry of presence in one another’s lives. That we would show up, listen and love the people in our lives who are going through pain. That we would make sacred space for them, as we sit with them in the ashes of tragedy. And that most of all, I hope that we would pray for God’s all-encompassing love and indescribable peace would meet them wherever they are. So, if you’re here this morning and you’re suffering and feeling alone, reach out. Reach out to me or any of the Billings Methodist pastors…and give us the honor of sitting with you…reminding you that you are not alone. Remember that the peace, love and light of God is with you…even on the darkest days. Amen.

Let us affirm our faith and the God who calls us to be this authentic church. Will you join me?

I believe in God, the Great Sewer—
Who weaves us together in community,
Collecting our loose ends and turning them into belonging.

I believe in the Holy Spirit—
Who hems us in before and behind,
Catching us when we fall and writing us into God’s holy narrative.

And I believe in Jesus Christ—
Who loved and claimed the people society had thrown out, refusing to disregard

anyone as scrap.

I believe God has woven part of God’s self into the fiber of our being, Making us inherently worthy of love and belonging.

I believe the fabric of my life is weak,
That I am prone to error and need God’s handiwork to remind me of love.

I believe in the Church, and that like a quilt of different fabrics, She is designed to be as diverse and beautiful as God’s creation.

And I believe that when life unravels,
God is there to stitch my wounds together,
To hold me in the palm of God’s hand, to tell me of love, And to invite me into a new journey.
Amen.