

From the “sadder but wiser” file: You don’t know what you’ve got until it’s gone. That’s true in our personal and professional lives. That’s true in our spiritual lives.

We are shaped by our losses; losses like Chera has so graciously and courageously shared with us; losses we may hide, perhaps because keeping quiet keeps it from being real; we hide the loss from ourselves as much as we hide it from one another; or perhaps we hide our loss because our loss is “unacceptable, inappropriate,” and we’ve internalized the subtle or not-so-subtle message that we shouldn’t feel that way. “Get over it. Move on.”

Who wants to listen to that? These are the voices of Job’s friends – Bildad, Eliphaz, and Zophar. These are the voices of conventional wisdom; pat answers for any and every question. We come out of hiding and name our loss, only to be told who’s to blame. “If we’d only made different choices, we wouldn’t be in this mess. If we’d only listened to what they told us, we could have avoided this loss. And lurking just beneath the surface of their answers is the message: It’s your fault. You deserve this.”

Who wants to listen to that? Isn’t the pain of our loss enough? No wonder we hide!

Then they bring God in to the conversation. “You need to have faith. You need to pray. God is good. God is just. Maybe there’s something in your life that you need to confess. If you do that, God will bless you again. Or maybe God is teaching you a lesson, and once you learn it, things will be OK.”

I wish I was making this up, but people in pain have shared with me comments like these that well-meaning (and not-so-well meaning) folks have said to them in response to their pain. I’ve said a few of these things myself. We all have the potential to be one of Job’s friends.

Who wants to listen to that? No wonder we hide.

Hiding keeps us safe, and there is a time and a place for that. But hiding isn’t healing; hiding keeps us stuck where we are as we are, and we may live with the pain of our loss for the rest of our lives.

Jesus doesn’t hide. Job doesn’t hide. Jesus cries out from his cross, *Psalm 22:1–2 (NRSV)* *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.* Job lifts his eyes to heaven, shakes his fist, and declares: *Job 23:2–5 (NRSV)* *“Today also my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy despite my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling! I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. I would learn what he would answer me, and understand what he would say to me.*

They refuse to play the polite game. Job will not hide his losses and accept the easy answers offered by voices of conventional wisdom. He won't hide; he will seek, and he won't stop seeking until he has found.

① HIDE

You don't know what you've got until it's gone, but when it's gone, the absence creates an opportunity for a new Presence; a faith that will see us through the darkness; a faith that will hide and seek.

A writer put it this way: It is hard to stay with this contradiction between what the Bible affirms about God and the atrocities that speak of God's absence. One is tempted to speak instead about human evil and the need for human resistance to evil, or to change the focus and talk about God's sustaining presence with the victim, or to reinterpret God's power in terms of non-coercive love. These are not irrelevant matters – they have their place – but they must not be engaged too quickly or used as a means of evading the painful contradiction itself. Martin Buber aptly calls this contradiction, “the rent in the heart of the world.”

In a paradoxical way, one often comes to know the meaning of a thing through its absence rather than in its presence. An illustration, which originally derives from the philosopher Heidegger, makes this point. It speaks of a carpenter who goes into his well-furnished workshop, with its stacks of wood, containers of nails, and racks of tools. Intent on the activity of the project, the carpenter pays little attention to the individual items. The wood, the nails, the hammer are simply taken for granted as part of the whole of the carpenter's activity. But suddenly, the hammer breaks, the shaft snapping off at the head. For the first time, the carpenter becomes genuinely aware of the hammer. It has never been so vivid in its wholeness as it has become in its brokenness. The image of the hammer, what it does, how essential it is to the task of carpentry, are all inescapably present to the carpenter precisely because of its absence. So it is with Job. One can imagine Job before his catastrophe speaking fluently about God's justice and the moral order of the world. In a certain sense, he would have understood what he was talking about, but only in a way comparable to the carpenter who, as he walked into the workshop, could have described the wood, the nails, and the hammer. Only now that Job has experienced the brokenness of justice and the absence of the God of justice does he possess the urgent, existential knowledge of justice and of God.¹

God never means more to us than when God is hidden from us. The hiddenness of God drives us out into the open. We stop hiding and start healing. We ask God the hard questions, and we are changed by the encounter. God doesn't give us easy answers; God gives us wisdom; a faith that can face the hard realities of life – the evil, the injustice, the suffering – the realities that call God into question; we can face the fact that sometimes God hides and still we seek.

¹ Carole A. Newsom, *Job*, in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 4, ed Leander E. Keck, et. al. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 513-514

② SEEK

Job takes in the view from his ash heap. He has lost everything – personally, professionally, physically. He is ruined. He’s lost everything, including the faith that once sustained him. He’s in the dark. God is hidden, but Job will not let God off that easy. “Let go and let God” works when you have something to let go of, but when it’s all been taken away, *Job 23:16–17 (NRSV)* *God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me; If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!*

Job holds God responsible. Job calls God to account. Job’s spiritual greatness lies in his refusal to let God off the hook. He seeks for God who is hidden in the darkness. He continues to believe even as he questions.

One writer put it this way: What kind of faith is possible for a person who refused to let go of [the belief in a God of justice and the seeming indifference of God to a world of injustice]? Martin Buber says of Job that in spite of all he experienced, “Job’s faith in justice is not broken down. But he is no longer able to have a single faith in God and in justice.... He believes now in justice in spite of believing in God, and he believes in God in spite of believing in justice. But he cannot forego his claim that they will be united somewhere, sometime, although he has no idea in his mind how this will be achieved.”

It takes a lot of faith to believe and question, to refuse to accept easy answers that diminish our suffering and minimize our losses and demand that God come out of hiding.

God does respond to that demand, but not the way we may want. God’s response will not reinforce our preconceived notions of how the Almighty makes it all alright. Instead, God lifts our gaze to a hill far away, to an old rugged cross, the emblem of suffering and shame, for as Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his *Letters and Papers from Prison* [in a world of suffering] “only the suffering God can help.”²

God suffered on the cross. God suffered with Job. God suffers with us – with you and with me in the particulars of our pain. God feels it. God knows it.

You don’t know what you’ve got until it’s gone. The presence of absence does not equal the absence of Presence. The God-forsaken Christ will not forsake us. When God hides, when we are lost in darkness, when our cry for justice is answered with silence, don’t let God off the hook! And don’t accept the blasphemous drivel that, “It must be God’s will.” Keep the faith, and keep questioning God! God won’t give us easy answers; God will give us wisdom; a faith that can face the hard realities of life; a faith that can endure being lost in darkness; a faith that can respond to the hiddenness of God with a devout determination to seek. Amen.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Collier Books, 1971), 361.