

When all else fails... read the instructions, is what I remember from my childhood. But for Job in his day, as his world failed around him, there were no instructions, except the unhelpful comments and questions from his friends! And when all else failed in our world through the pandemic, there were no instructions either, except as we discovered them along the way...! One of my favorite endings is this one: when all else fails, take a nap! Many of us learned the blessings of naps during the pandemic...to the point that perhaps we overdosed a few times?! How about these: when all else fails, smile. Or, when all else fails, go for a run! A lot of us tried those on during the pandemic! Many of us learned the blessing of this one: when all else fails, breathe! Some of us learned the wisdom of breathing first, before reacting, and got to practice patience a lot through the pandemic. Here are two hopeful ones, one more possible than the other during the pandemic: when all else fails, take a bubble bath ... or, when all else fails, take a vacation! Here's one some may have found helpful during the pandemic: When all else fails, hug the cat – now our cat would not tolerate a hug from me, but our dogs would and did – a LOT! In fact, I think many of us were blessed by pets as we traveled through the pandemic. There are many other endings to that phrase, but here are two I'd like us to think about a bit more, as we think about our scripture for today. When all else fails, pray. When all else fails, God doesn't. How might these be helpful, when we are suffering great losses?

I'd like you to remember with me some of the losses of relationships and community that we suffered through the pandemic first. I can remember the frustration of trying to figure out how to lead meetings and studies online, and our reluctance to make the switch at first, thinking we might solve the pandemic quickly enough we could just go one month without meeting, ok maybe two months, wait, 3 months and still no cure for the pandemic?! And the rising fear and disbelief as things worsened, and our need to shift for at least **a year**, became apparent. I remember as we moved into summer and discovered outdoors was safer, we could put back some visits with people, and many businesses scrambled to move outdoors, as well as online. But then, as we moved into fall and holidays, we learned to our dismay that family gatherings with those outside our home circles would not be safe...and some gatherings would not be able to happen; some did happen, and tragedy resulted-my uncle died after Thanksgiving dinner indoors with his family. Some figured out safe ways to gather al fresco! Space heaters for garages, fire pits for decks became hot items, literally! And the losses continued to grow...most of us lost at least one family member or friend to covid, some lost jobs, some lost businesses, some had to change jobs, many survived the worst with unemployment assistance and rent abatement. Many are still trying to pick up the pieces, or begin new, since we made it to vaccinations, and now boosters. Our family and friend networks became complicated as thinking about covid became political; our communities changed as businesses closed, and venues shut, and events were cancelled. Our support systems and friendship groups were battered, and our way of life shrank to a very small world that was often virtual, with brief forays for meals, groceries, things ordered online for pick up. Even church was reduced to online, drive through, 'til we could move some meetings, worship, and fellowship outdoors again. Now we are keeping safe with masks indoors, with outside air moving through our spaces. Remember our first Sundays back in the sanctuary? Such joy and tears to be together again! Literally, had we been able to sing together safely, our first hymn back in the sanctuary might have been, “And are we yet alive, and see each

other's face? What troubles have we seen, what mighty conflicts past, fighting without and fears within, since we assembled last! Yet out of all the Lord, hath brought us by his love; and still he doth his help afford, and hides our life above." This hymn by Wesley was originally sung by Methodists when they gathered for quarterly and annual meetings.

Our sufferings and losses seem to resemble those endured by Job – family deaths, friends lost or seen no more, or perhaps now in conflict with us...no community present with us, no visible support, our time in community fraught during pandemic surges...no more parties hosted, or attended, no community concerts or galas to enjoy... Job was companioned only by a few friends who kept pressing him to say what he had done wrong to deserve his tragedies; and by his wife who said he should just curse God and die, he was so miserable, and his life as he had known it was over, anyway. Our text today shares Job's despair and frustration as he accuses God of trapping him and harming him and his family, and driving away his friends. Job has progressed from trusting God has his back, to anger at God, and soon moves to despair at God's indifference in the face of his and others' suffering. He travels the stages of grief with God, and does not shrink from sharing all his thoughts and demands, and is determined to hear from God and demand justice. I learned in studying this text and book, that the story of Job is actually a retelling of a familiar Mesopotamian story about suffering, but that the Hebrews have re-told it here with some additions and new perspectives. They have included it in their canon precisely because it points out very clearly that bad things do happen to good people, that good is not always rewarded with wealth, and that the ways of God are vaster than we can comprehend. The story also teaches us that we can always talk to God, and that God is present with us, even if we don't always understand his presence. The book explores many approaches to suffering, some more helpful than others. Yes, we can learn from suffering, and Job does. Sometimes it is a consequence of our bad choices, and we can learn to make better choices. Sometimes we suffer from random violence and chaos, and we can choose our response – to be bitter, or to seek to be better. Some are too overwhelmed by their suffering to trust God again, and choose to abandon God since they feel God has abandoned them. How have you handled your suffering? Over the course of your life? Over the course of the pandemic? Job teaches us that we can trust God to stick with us through our suffering, anger and despair, and that God can offer us a wider perspective on our lives lived amid the beauty and wonder of all creation. We are part of an amazing web of life, that is treasured and ordered by God. We each have our place, our part to play, and limits to our existence. There is order, and there is chaos; there is justice, and there is injustice. But God is with us, all of us.

Jesus in his life, death and resurrection shares God's presence with us more deeply than the story of Job can tell. Jesus, God in person with us, in his greatest moment of suffering on the cross, shows us how to travel the depths of grief and the heights of love in our experiences of loss and suffering in his time on the cross: Jesus suffers openly, saying "I thirst," and questioning why God has abandoned him, as he feels so alone in his agony...then he remembers his family and friends around him, and knits them together as a new family, while he is suffering (woman here is your son, and to John, here is your mother; he seeks to mend brokenness, asking God to forgive those who don't understand the harm they are doing; and he welcomes a broken person with him into paradise, for the truth that he grasped and shared. And lastly he accepts his death and entrusts himself to God.) This is the love

that God in Christ models for us – a love that can be honest and about suffering; that **can** love despite harm and brokenness and seek to bring healing and build community in the darkest of circumstances. Jesus shows us a love that finally accepts suffering and trusts God to care to the very end and beyond, in paradise.

Job's story shows us the depths of suffering known not just in the death of loved ones, and not just in the physical pain of illnesses. A very real suffering is also felt in times of perceived and real isolation. This is why so many of us tried to find ways to connect with our seniors in homes or home alone, with family and friends living alone, and why we agonized when loved ones had to be hospitalized alone with covid. God bless all our nurses and doctors who went above and beyond to love and care for many as they suffered and died. Many of them helped families to connect with loved ones by ipad and personal phones. Many transported gifts through the hospital to patients' rooms. Job feels so alone without family, community, and especially God. Where is God, and why is God not helping him, he wonders. This is how Psalm 22 begins, which Jesus quotes on the cross. "My God, why have you forsaken me?!" So often we think that, when we are in trouble: we feel abandoned by everyone, even God... yet Jesus and Job both remind us there is a bigger reality and bigger perspective we are part of, if we can look beyond our immediate pain and suffering, to envision God's greater perspective and all-encompassing, eternal love. Job learns he is important enough to God to be answered, and blessed again. Psalm 22 ends with a triumphant cry of praise as the psalmist understands that God has heard his cry, and he vows to praise God in worship, and celebrates that all generations and all nations will praise and serve the Lord, who heeds those suffering and the poor. And the next psalm, Psalm 23, reminds us that the Lord is our shepherd and cares for all our needs, and leads us through all our days, even through the valley of the shadow of death, 'til we dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Jesus' last words run this trajectory as well, as he takes us through his pain, connects again with community, and trusts that he will be in the arms of God at the end.

So how shall we live amid loss, suffering, isolation, and broken community? Like Job, we can pour out our pain and questions and demands for justice before God! We too can trust now, that God is with us, listening. We can continue to seek to be in God's presence. When all else fails, pray – and listen and look for God's answers. When my husband had cancer, we listened and prayed for what God might be teaching us through Rodney's time of suffering, treatment, and healing. We were blessed to be carried in the love and prayers of others, and to be helped through some of our burdens by those who gifted us with food, paid time off, rides, and childcare. When all else fails, God doesn't. God comes to us in a myriad of ways: through strength, through wisdom, through peace, through quiet, through endurance, through tears, through hugs, through prayer shawls even. Both Rodney and I received prayer shawls to help us through those months, and felt ourselves wrapped in the congregation's love and prayers. We were literally and figuratively warmed by the shawls, representing their arms, and the arms of God around us as well. This is why I have continued to encourage congregations to have this ministry. When we walk through the darkest valleys of our lives, we need tangible reminders of God's presence, and of others' presence with us: the shawls help people to really feel our presence and care, as well as God's. Jesus shows us that connecting with community, building new family, forgiving those who hurt us, and welcoming those who believe in us, are part of God's answer to suffering as well. So, when all else fails, pray; and when all else fails, God

doesn't! So let us grieve, but let us also build new community, rebuild and reconcile our communities, and let us do so, praying for the love of God to strengthen us and guide us.

When we were struggling through the isolation of the pandemic, our UMCG church leaders and members through prayer and collaboration, sought to come up with new ways to help us connect with one another, and with the community in need. We got together in our neighborhoods to study and to serve; we met to make prayer shawls, we made face masks for folks in need in the Dominican Republic, we collected food and recycled Styrofoam as drive throughs! We gave gifts to our teachers, and holiday dinners to families in need. We sent cards and made phone calls, we delivered gifts and meals, we held birthday and farewell parades, and gave large tips to those who were serving us in difficult circumstances.

How might we, like Jesus, bring healing and rebuild community now? We still have many suffering economic hardship, for their family or business; we still have many of our children and youth, as well as adults who are struggling with anxiety and depression; we have many veterans in need of community and support, as well as new refugees in need of peace and love. We can be the financial, prayerful, and tangible support that these and others need. We partner with gifts and referrals for TriCity Family Services, as a church and personally; with our gifts and support for the Welcome Kit with World Relief, and to Habitat, JFON, the Neighbor Project, and more. A portion of your gifts to our church enable us to support with dollars and volunteers, so many wonderful healing and helping organizations. When all else fails, we are called to love God and love our neighbors, as ourselves. To love like Jesus did and does: to be healers, and repairers of the breach. Job and Jesus remind us that God is always with us, and we can always be with God. We may feel alone sometimes, especially in hardship, but we know now that it is then God carries us, and holds us, and asks us to hold each other. Woman, here is your son. Son, here is your mother. God, forgive them, for they know not what they do. We are called to build and rebuild family with our neighbors, all of our neighbors, here and around the world, for we are all one as the family of God, Ohana! No one should be left behind, for any reason. This Jesus shows us, and teaches us, and lives and dies and is resurrected to prove to us. Let us wait no longer in our suffering and fears, but pray and serve with God and Christ, so others may know and feel the healing love of God through us!

In Jesus' name, Amen!

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