

## Among the Shipwrecked

A sermon preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel ©  
at The North Parish of North Andover, Unitarian Universalist  
North Andover, MA on October 16, 2016

*"Behind the hardness there is fear,  
and if you touch the heart of fear you find sadness,  
and if you touch the sadness you find the vast blue sky..." -- Rick Fields*

*"Maybe you need to throw the line, maybe you need to catch it.  
The lifeline is right here and it's for you." -- Rev. Alan Jones, Episcopalian*

In a culture that worships winners,  
it might be hard for some people to understand the strength  
that comes from knowing loss.

And churches are full of people who know about loss.

You might not guess that from looking at us—  
in this picture-perfect church sitting so nice up on the hill, but it's true.  
(Can I get a witness? Anyone out there know loss?)

Let's be honest-- sometimes it's loss that brings us in the door;  
sometimes loss happens to us along the way.

As Episcopalian preacher the Rev. Alan Jones puts it, we're all shipwrecked.

Or as the Rev. John Corrado put it in the reading this morning,  
we're all "losers"- God bless us, everyone!

Corrado offers a lovely list of losses you can find among us:  
the loss of our hair, teeth, memories;  
the loss of savings and jobs;  
the loss of parents, the loves of our lives, even our children or grandchildren;  
the loss of a way forward, the loss of faith, the loss of hope.

And the list could go on! For certainly among us,  
some have lost their health, energy or peace of mind, their serenity or recovery.  
Some lost their childhood religion, their faith in Jesus, or their faith in God.

Some have lost the future they had every right to expect.

Some have lost their homes, or their ability to pay for heat or food.

These days, some have lost confidence in our nation, in our fellow citizens, in freedom of religion and freedom of the press.

And as we look out at our wider community, the world, the earth, there are losses everywhere we turn.

We see the refugees from war or climate disruption—like the group that just arrived in Lowell recently from Congo, Syria, Myanmar and Iraq.

We see exiles and immigrants who've often had terrible journeys to an alien culture and land.

Some have lost not only their homes but entire families, their entire livelihood, their entire nation.

Some, even children, have quite literally been shipwrecked— and lost at sea.

Few of us can fully comprehend that kind of loss.

But many have been shipwrecked in other ways—loosened from our moorings and set adrift.

We may have been hit by news we almost cannot bear, felt the ground shift under our feet, suffered in ways that are hard to understand.

And in those moments, when we are tossed and troubled, we need someone to throw us a lifeline.

In the Hebrew scriptures, there is a story about a man who loses everything— the story of Job.

It is an ancient story, likely written in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC,

And it begins with an even older folktale,

about a wager between God and an adversary.

In this folktale, when God points out a faithful man, this adversary says that the man is faithful only because he is blessed,

and that he'll turn away from God when his fortune changes.

So God agrees to let this adversary do what he will to test the man.

That man is Job.

Job is the kind of guy who has everything going for him.

He has a big family- including seven sons and three daughters.

He has wealth- thousands and thousands of sheep, camels, oxen and donkeys, and many servants to take care of them all.

He has the respect of those who know him- for we read he was "blameless and upright".

Indeed he was, we learn, "the greatest of all the people of the east."

But then Job loses everything:

his wealth, his house, his flocks and servants.

He loses his ten children and their families.

Finally, he even loses his health; he is covered with sores "from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head."

Job is like the wealthy, successful, much respected man living in the suburbs who ends up homeless and destitute and sick on the streets of a city.

He is like the professional, upper class citizen who ends up a refugee of war.

He is like the immigrant forced to leave everything behind.

Job is reduced to sitting in ashes scraping his sores with a pot sherd.

Job has three friends who hear of his suffering, and we read that "*each of them set out from his home*"; "*They met together to go and console and comfort him.*"

In other words, they show up. They don't avoid Job; they go to him.

We read, "*When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.*"

These friends knew what to do.

They show up. They stay with Job.

They keep him company for a week and just wait for him to speak.

But when he *does* speak, it's hard for them to hear what he has to say.

Job curses the day of his birth.

In his anguish, he asks why he did not die at birth, why he is still alive.

He says *"Truly the thing that I fear comes upon me,  
and what I dread befalls me.*

*I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; I have no rest; but trouble comes."*

Job is physically, spiritually and emotionally raw  
and brutally honest about his pain.

When he stops speaking, one of his friends begins cautiously:

"If one ventures a word with you, will you be offended?"

Then, without waiting for an answer, he says "But who can keep from speaking?"

And this is where things start to go wrong.

You see, Job's three friends believe that

Job must have deserved this bad luck somehow.

Their theology tells them that he or his children

*must* have done something to offend God for these tragedies to occur.

I suppose it must be too scary for them to consider  
that they could just as easily be in Job's shoes.

They start to judge and blame Job, his attitudes, his actions.

They just can't resist giving him some advice.

Anyone here ever guilty of that-- giving unwanted advice?

Or has anyone received it? It doesn't really help, does it?

Job's friends suggest he's forgotten some past wrongdoing  
and urge him to repent of his sins, at first gently,  
but then more forcefully as the debate goes on.

And boy, does it go on—*for 34 chapters!*

(That is why we're not doing a play about Job, like we did about Jonah last week!)

Job maintains his integrity, and insists he hasn't done anything wrong.

His friends continue to insist he must have done *something*.

Both sides continue to ask "Why?"

Job even confronts God directly—he asks "*Why have you made me your target?*

*Why have I become a burden to you?"*

Why, why, why? *Why* has this happened? *Why?*

In response, God simply reminds Job- in a dramatic way- of the vastness and the mystery of all creation, of all that is. Job does not turn away, but sees and experiences God directly. God never does answer the question why.

In the wake of loss, we, too, are often tempted to ask the question "Why?" And like Job and his friends, we are often frustrated in getting any answers.

But there are other questions that we *can* start to answer:

What shall I do now?

How shall I live?

What kind of person do I want to be?

How shall I heal?

Who might keep me company, without judgment or pity, superiority or blame?

Such company is good to have, because healing from loss takes work. It means befriending sorrow, walking with sorrow- and sometimes through the valley of the shadow of death. It means taking off the mask that "everything is alright". It means being excessively gentle with yourself. It means making a commitment to rest, to recovery, to silence, and recovering a sense of awe.

The good news is that, as members of a congregation, we know we do not have to do this work of healing alone.

There are many here who are ready to throw us the lifeline,  
ready to walk with us- without judgment or pity, superiority or blame.

The Cuban-American theologian Roberto Goizueta  
gives a name to theology that has this kind of companionship at its heart:  
it is a theology of *acompañamiento*, or accompaniment.  
Goizueta is currently the Flatley Chair in Catholic Theology at Boston College  
and the author of a 2003 book called *Caminemos con Jesus:  
Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment*.

His book explores the idea of Jesus as a companion,  
especially for the poor and marginalized and for immigrants on the move.  
Goizueta notes that for those in exile, for those who've lost everything,  
the phrase "Caminemos con Jesus"- or "we walk with Jesus"-  
offers a new kind of home.

This home is not a secure physical place, but a home made up  
of "a community of persons, who as exiles themselves,  
are *together* walking with Jesus."

This theology of accompaniment  
challenges Christian churches to walk not only with Jesus  
but with the poor, as Jesus did.

It challenges churches to walk with those on the margins of society  
who are striving for social, political and economic liberation.

This Catholic theologian says, "To know God is to do justice.

To love God is to love one's neighbor."

Our companionship, he says, must transcend barriers, boundaries and borders.

Now, some of you may be wondering why I'm talking about  
the work of a Catholic theologian who speaks about walking with Jesus.  
After all, ours is an inclusive and free-thinking faith- so in addition to Christian UUs,

we have theistic UUs, Jewish and Muslim and Hindu UUs,  
Agnostic, Buddhist, Humanist and Athiest UUs,  
and followers of process theology or religious naturalism.

So while some of us may feel accompanied through life by Jesus,  
others may feel accompanied by other teachers and enlightened beings.  
Some may be accompanied by the ancestors, or by God, or the goddess,  
or by all beings in nature, or the Creative energy of Life.

Yet something that we hold in common is that  
we chose to accompany each another.

For all of our theologies, and perhaps because of them,  
we, too, practice a theology of accompaniment.

Goizueta and the story of Job both prompt me to ask:

How might we accompany each other even more faithfully?

How might we continue to accompany our neighbors,

including those who've lost almost everything

and those seeking social, political and economic liberation?

There are so many different ways to walk together in faith.

You've already heard about a few of them today—

from the Caring Team and Jericho Road- and of course there are many more.

We accompany each other by showing up at worship.

We accompany each other in small groups and support groups.

We accompany each other through meditation or prayer.

We accompany our neighbors through various outreach ministries.

But the key is not just *that* we walk together, but *how* we walk together.

After all, it's easy to sense judgment or pity, superiority or blame from 1,000 miles away.

Thank goodness that we who gather know what it is to experience loss!

We know how powerful it is when someone sits with us

in the rawness of our grief and anger.

We know how powerful it is when someone shows up, listens,  
and is present to us without judgment or pity, superiority or blame.  
We know the impact of small gestures: a hug, a meal, a prayer shawl, a quiet walk,  
some supplies to get started in a new land.

Rev. Alan Jones writes, "Throw the lifeline, someone is drifting away.  
Throw out the lifeline, someone is sinking today.  
Maybe you need to throw the line, maybe you need to catch it...  
(Either way...) The lifeline is right here, and it's for you."

*Lets pause for just a moment in reflection, meditation and prayer:*  
Spirit of life and love and God,  
there are those among us facing loss today,  
and others who have already traveled that path.  
Let us support and walk with one another.  
May we accompany each other in this sacred space, with tenderness and trust.  
May we find ways to be good and humble companions in the world.  
Together may we move from fear to love, from dis-ease to health,  
from sobbing to breathing, and from isolation to community.  
May we honor each being on this road of life. Amen.