

There once was a man in the land of Uz named Job. The start of the story of Job sounds an awful lot like the start of a good fairytale – something Disney could turn into a nice grossing film. Of course, once we get past the “once upon a time” bit, we discover anything but a fairytale. Job instead, is a story of death and destruction. I’m not sure even Walt Disney himself could make this parable sound happy. If you look at the book of Job in your pew Bibles, all we have to do is read the subtitles for each chapter to get a feel for just how desolate this story really is: There’s an attack on Job’s character. Job loses his property and children. Attack on Job’s health. Job curses the day he was born. One of Job’s friends says Job must have sinned and is now being corrected by God. Job argues his complaint is just. “My suffering is without end.” Another friend says Job should repent. Job responds, “I loathe my life.” A third friend declares Job deserves punishment. By chapter 17 we have Job’s despondent prayer for relief. More horrible theology by his friends – God punishes the wicked. But, Job replies, the wicked go unpunished every day. Finally by chapter 29, Job wraps up his defense.

There is literally not a more depressing book in the Bible. Job is the parable of a man who has lost everything he holds dear – his family, his health, his reputation. And he rails against the injustice of it all. Why should this happen to me? I’m a good guy! Bad people get away with murder, but I can’t get a break?! Everything Job thought he knew about the way the world was supposed to work has come crumbling down around him until he is left with nothing but chaos and questions.

This is a parable about death – and it’s a parable many of us have experienced in our own lives. Untimely death of a loved one. A betrayal by a friend. Loss of a job. Hurricanes wiping out entire towns. 100 year floods that come 3 years in a row. We see death and destruction everywhere we turn. Why is there so much suffering in the world?

We also deal with the less obvious deaths, the grief that hovers right below the surface that sometimes we don’t even recognize for what it is. This is the grief created from the death of expectations of how things might have been, from the loss of dreams and aspirations from facing worldview that no longer holds up. Like Job we wonder if the darkness has no end. We are Job, mourning what was. But we are also Job’s friends, clinging desperately to a framework that says everything happens for a reason. Bad people wear black hats and always get what they deserve and good people wear white hats and will always come out on top. Anything that falls outside of this carefully constructed box must be false. Job’s friends cannot handle their buddy’s downfall because they cannot make sense of it based on what they thought they knew of how the world was supposed to work. The parable of Job is the story of a world turned upside down and scattered, speaking to each of us of the unfairness of life, the frustration and grief that lingers as we come to terms with a world that doesn’t always work out the way we wished it would.

Finally, in Chapter 38, God speaks. Thank goodness. Now God can speak some sense into this chaos, can answer the questions Job has hurled to the heavens. But God – the very God who gladly speaks to Elijah in the still small quiet – faces down poor, suffering Job in a whirlwind of power and majesty. “Gird up your loins” God say to Job – “now it’s my turn to speak.” “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb? Have the gates of death been revealed to you? Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?” For 4 chapters, God goes on with this unrelenting line of questioning until Job literally has nothing left to say. And after all these verses, God has answered ZERO of Job’s questions. As one commentator put it, God answered none of Job’s questions with periods, just more question marks. But God never really set out to answer the questions – God simply changes the narrative. God moves this from a parable of death and suffering, forcing Job out of his own complaints, and moves this to a new kind of story all together. “Look at the stars. The rhythm of the day and night. The edge of the sea.” While God may not answer a single question or respond to Job’s specific defense, God points to creation as the ultimate answer for Job – and for us. God’s creation tells us that where there is darkness – there is also light. Creation tells us that when a seed is planted, the seed dies – but it also blooms into a flower. Creation tells us that when a caterpillar spins its cocoon, it will no longer exist as it was – but in time, it becomes a butterfly. The God of creation is a God who has declared – and continues to declare – that where there is death, there is also the possibility for new life. Death is not the end of the story.

Off the southwest coast of Scotland lies a tiny little island called Iona. In 563, an Irish monk named Columba travelled with a small group of followers and settled on Iona, building a thriving Christian community there. It was from Columba's community that missionaries travelled spreading the gospel message throughout Scotland, the British Isles and even into Europe. The gorgeously illustrated Book of Kells began on Iona. Pilgrims flocked to the holy shores, recognizing the isle as a sacred space. But life on the holy island was not without hardships. The island sat unprotected, helpless to those intent on pillaging and plunder. In 806, 68 monks were massacred by Viking raiders on a beach now known as Martyrs Bay. By the late 800s, Columba's community on Iona was all but abandoned making true Columba's own words, "Iona of my heart, Iona of my love. Instead of monks voices shall be the lowing of cattle." Iona would not remain deserted for long. By 1200 a Benedictine community brought new life to the island, complete with a new abbey and sanctuary. For hundreds of years, monks and nuns worked alongside the islanders, worshipping and working, praying and serving creating a thriving community of hospitality and praise. But again, death came to Iona, this time in the form of the Scottish Reformation. The Abbey and its community was once again dismantled and disseminated. Iona became a parable of death. And yet...Sometime, while the Abbey sat in ruins – roofless and crumbling – a rare plant, a fern that loves the salty air, began to take root in the Abbey walls. In the midst of death, new life began to grow. Today, Iona is once again home to a thriving Christian community. Worship fills the abbey walls, pilgrims and tourists alike wander the paths, walk the beaches where martyrs gave their lives, pray in the quiet spaces, and eat simple meals in the abbey refectory. Worship and work, prayer and service again are the hallmark of the Holy Isle, living into Columba's original desire for this sacred land. Iona stands, not as a parable of death – though it has seen its fair share, but as a story of the possibilities of new life that come out of death. Though the new Iona community rebuilt the crumbling Abbey, enclosing it once again with solid roof, surprisingly those rare ferns still grow in the walls of the sanctuary. There they remain as a sign for the Community and all who visit of that the Abbey still breathes, a symbol of new life and new beginnings.

Where do we see signs of new life, signs of breath in spaces we once thought abandoned? Are we looking for the possibilities of resurrection?

Job was so focused on his own suffering, he forgot the message of the entirety of God's creation – he forgot to look for the possibility of new life. In the midst of even the darkest of times, God has shown again and again that resurrection is possible. But we can also get caught up in the reverse – becoming so intent on the salvation of new life – that we overlook the transformation that must occur for new life to be possible. Resurrection does not come without death. New life does not appear unless we let go of the old, embracing the hard work of transformation, opening ourselves to change and growth.

Fall has come late this year and we're still not seeing all the beauty of the changing leaves. But this is a good time of year to remember that the changing and dying of the leaves is necessary in order for us to enjoy the beauty of spring. Fall is a season of transformation, a season of dying. But this transformation is necessary in order for new life to emerge. And so any story of new life is also a story of death. Death is a necessary reality of our life with God. We must die to self in order to embrace God's gift of new life. So where do we make space to grieve what needs to be grieved, mourn the losses, and let go of what we need to leave behind even as we embrace the new possibilities ahead?

Make space for the transformation to occur. God joins us, as God did Job, in the suffering and hard work of grieving. But the God of creation does not call us to wallow in the grief of what was. Instead, God points us onward to resurrection life. The God who calls the name of each and every star, who holds the sea in its place, who has seen the gates of death and knows the depth of darkness – is the God of new beginnings, of new life, of resurrection.

Where are the seeds in your life being planted in fresh soil, gone to die in order that something new might spring forth? Where are the buds in our community waiting to bloom into glorious signs of hope and love? Where are the ferns, rare and lovely, growing in the ruins? Our Creator God calls us to remain on the look-out for the signs of new life springing up around us, looking for the possibilities of new creation ever before us.