

**Worship Outline with Texts**  
**Ghost Stories 3: The Whispering Spirit**  
**July 26, 2020**

**Countdown (10 minutes)**

*Ghost-y stuff, info about worship, welcome, etc.*

**Opening Verse (Harris)**

Proverbs 8:1-4 (CEB)

Doesn't Wisdom cry out  
and Understanding shout?  
Atop the heights along the path,  
at the crossroads she takes her stand.  
By the gate before the city,  
at the entrances she shouts:  
I cry out to you, people;  
my voice goes out to all of humanity.

**Prelude**

**Welcome (Rachael)**

**Opening Prayer (Harris)**

**God, we thank you for summer and for the feeling of the sun on our faces. As the days are long and lasting, so your love for us is endless, full of possibilities. Awaken us, as you have awakened all that grows around us, to your light and your love. We turn our faces to you, following your way of light and love. May our worship honor you, we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.**

**Offering and Prayer (Rachael for the series)**

Holy God, your generosity overflows in our lives. Make us your hands and feet in our communities as we follow you and build your kingdom of justice and peace for all people. Bless these gifts that we offer to our church, and multiply them in service to you and to others. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

**Song**

*The Music of Living by Dan Forrest*

*Chancel Choir*

*©2012 Hinshaw Music, Inc*

Giver of life  
Creator of all that is lovely  
Teach me to sing the words to your song

I want to feel the music of living  
And not fear the sad songs  
But from them make new songs  
Composed of both laughter and tears

Giver of life  
Creator of all that is lovely  
Teach me to dance to the sounds of your world

Giver of life  
Creator of all that is lovely  
Teach me to sing the words to your song

### **Baptism (Bennett)**

#### **Song**

*Come, Thou Fount*

*UM Hymnal Number 400, verses 1 and 3*

*Words: Robert Robinson, Music: Wyeth*

*Public Domain*

Come, thou fount of every blessing  
Tune my heart to sing thy grace  
Streams of mercy never ceasing  
Call for songs of loudest praise  
Teach me some melodious sonnet  
Sung by flaming tongues above  
Praise the mount I'm fixed upon it  
Mount of thy redeeming love

O to grace how great a debtor  
Daily I'm constrained to be  
Let thy goodness like a fetter  
Bind my wandering heart to thee  
Prone to wander Lord I feel it  
Prone to leave the God I love  
Here's my heart O take and seal it  
Seal it for thy courts above

### **Scripture (paraphrased to ghost story style)**

Job 4:12- 21

Job was going through a lot. His life had been so good, not too long ago. Until he lost everything. Everything. He lost his money, his business, his livelihood. And then he lost his family and his own health. Through it all, he held on to his faith in God, sometimes by only a thread.

Job's friends wanted to help him feel better, but what can you say when someone is suffering so much? How can you really help? One day, Job's friend Eliphaz, who was sitting with Job to keep him company, told Job about a spooky dream.

Eliphaz told Job:

One night, when I was sleeping hard and sound,  
I heard a whispering voice in my ear,  
like a secret that was meant only for me to hear.  
I was having strange and scary dreams all night  
and I was already feeling unsettled,  
and when I heard the whispering voice  
I was completely terrified.  
I was frozen with fear until I began to shake  
and shiver and all the hair on my neck and arms stood up on end.

A spirit floated across my vision,  
like a ghost visiting me in my dreams  
when I was all alone and there was no one who would hear me cry out.

Then the spirit stopped in front of me,  
but I couldn't really tell what it was - a person? A being? A ghost?

Then I heard that hushed, whispering voice again.  
It asked me, "Do you actually believe that people can be good enough for God?  
Can even the strongest or most holy person be better than God?  
God doesn't even trust God's own servants,  
even God's own angels get it wrong sometimes.  
So how much worse must humans be with those fragile bodies  
made of mud, who are weak and easily crushed like a moth?  
People are born, they suffer, and then they die. That's life.  
Most of us live our whole lives without ever really understanding  
what it's all about. And then we die."

**Sermon (Rachael)**

Ghost Stories, Volume 2: The Whispering Spirit  
Rev. Rachael Warner

I have a condition. Perhaps you've heard of it or known someone else who suffers from it. There isn't really a cure, except to be diligent in self awareness and to get enough rest. The condition is called foot-in-mouth syndrome. Are you familiar?

If I am not attentive to thinking first before allowing words to come tumbling out of my mouth, I am almost 100% guaranteed to say the wrong thing, every time. And then, instead of stopping and gathering myself up I'm prone to just...keep on talking, trying to somehow say something to fix the wrong thing I said. It doesn't work.

The only treatment for foot-in-mouth syndrome I've ever found effective is extensive physical and occupational therapy. Practicing over and over again the motion of opening the mouth to speak then pausing, closing the mouth, and thinking a little bit longer before saying any words.

Have you ever had this experience, where you wanted to say something, where the moment seemed to demand that you say something, and so you do...and then you instantly regret what you said, or realize it didn't come out at all how you intended, or become aware by the look on someone's face that you were not actually helping?

That's the feeling I want you to sit with for a few minutes as we explore today's spooky story from the Bible in our last week of this summer's Ghost Stories series.

Today we've gone to the book of Job for a spooky story, and you might remember that last summer we also read one of our spooky stories from the book of Job. Last summer we were at the very end of the book in chapter 41 and we read about a giant sea monster, the Leviathan. But today we're at the very beginning of the book, in chapter 4, and Pastor Laura gave us a very convincing telling of a creepy encounter with a whispering spirit in the middle of the night.

Let's get our bearings, since we have been jumping around the Bible a lot in this series. Job is part of the Hebrew Bible, or what we sometimes refer to as the Old Testament. It's categorized in the group of writings known as Wisdom literature. The writer uses a few different styles to build the dramatic story of Job - some fairy-tale, once-upon-a-time style writing, a lot of poetry, and moral-of-the story writing, like a fable or cautionary tale.

The once-upon-a-time sets the stage for this book in the first couple of chapters. Once upon a time there was a man named Job, and his life was AMAZING. He had everything he could ever have desired. A big home, a beautiful family, a large and successful livestock operation, servants who tended to his household, good friends, the respect of his neighbors and community. And he was a good man, a faithful man. The kind of person people would say deserved the good life he had. He had earned it, and he always gave God the glory and praise, and he always trusted in God to lead his life.

Meanwhile, as Job was living his happy and rewarding life on earth, there was a conversation happening in the cosmos, between God and Satan, whose name means 'the accuser.' The story goes that God was hosting a roundtable discussion of heavenly beings and Satan, the accuser, decided to come to the table after some many years of wandering the earth to and fro, having been sent away from heaven. God started a conversation with Satan, asking if while traveling around on earth Satan had ever met Job - such a good man, faithful and successful, completely reliant on God and always giving thanks and praise rightfully to God.

Satan challenged God, suggesting that perhaps Job wasn't all he was cracked up to be. After all, wouldn't anyone who had as good a life as Job put on a t-shirt that says #blessed and praise God? God was impressed by Job, but Satan, the accuser, accused Job of being a little too obvious. If God really wanted to impress Satan, he'd let Satan take all those comforts and blessings and successes away. Then they'd find out the real story. Then they'd see whether Job was really faithful to God, or simply a fair-weather fan.

God agreed. God believed in Job. God favored Job.  
And you know what happens in the Bible when God has a favorite person, right?  
God's favorite people go through some stuff. They do not have it easy.  
Job gets put to the test - and it is a very hard, completely unfair test.

Everything Job loves gets taken away, one after the other. Raiders attacked his farm, killing servants and stealing his livestock. One of his barns burst into flames, destroying everything inside. A desert tornado came out of nowhere and collapsed his son's home, where all his children and their families were inside eating dinner. No survivors. Then Job came down with an awful, painful skin disease that caused sores to form all over his body. His wife suggested it might be time for him to give up on God, who had clearly given up on him.

Job sat alone, in the desert with his grief and his pain.  
This is where three of his friends met him, having first gotten together to discuss what would be the best way to help. Job's losses and suffering weren't something they really knew how to approach. And that skin thing - was it contagious? Should they start a meal train or send a card? What would they say to him?

At first, they got it very right. They approached Job slowly, saw his deep pain and tore their own robes, poured dust over their heads, and took a seat beside him. For seven days and seven nights they sat with him, observing his pain, and they said nothing.

Then, the story switches to poetry as Job begins to speak. In the company of his friends and in the presence of God, Job releases his grief and despair, wishing he had never been born at all. And it would have been a powerful story of solidarity and a how-to manual on being present with someone during an unimaginable tragedy if the story had ended there. But, of course, it doesn't.

Job's friends, as it turns out, may have also suffered from foot-in-mouth syndrome. As soon as Job's silent grief and pain shifts to an outcry, they just can't help themselves. They feel compelled to say something. His pain is too much to witness, his loss too great to imagine. And, if this could happen to Job, who was the best man they knew, then there must be a reason. Otherwise, they'd have to contend with the possibility that this could also happen to him.

Now, remember I asked you to hang on to that feeling of saying the wrong thing in the moment when you are awkwardly trying to be present to someone else in their pain? What are some of the things you may have said that you realized pretty quickly weren't really helping? Here are a few of my greatest hits:

It could always be worse.  
There must be a reason.  
Pull yourself up by your bootstraps.  
There's no crying in baseball.

And the piece-de-resistance, the one Job's friend's go to right out of the gate:

You must've done something to deserve this.  
You've only brought this on yourself.  
Just have faith...and the deeper implication:  
Maybe you aren't as faithful as we all thought you were?

Does it make you cringe? This week's ghost story is about a scary dream Job's friend Eliphaz has in the night. I don't need to re-tell it, Pastor Laura told it in all its spooky glory. But Eliphaz tells Job the story of the whispering spirit that visited him for an even scarier purpose: to cast the blame for Job's loss and pain and suffering back on Job. Before telling the scary story, Eliphaz began his comments to Job with the biblical language equivalent of, No offense, but...

Anyone who has ever suffered even a single bout of foot-in-mouth syndrome will recognize the danger of that phrase! It all goes downhill from there:

No offense, Job, but I feel obligated to speak up.  
Can you dish it out but not take it?  
Do you only trust God when it works in your favor, or do you now trust that God is punishing you for something?  
Do you actually think an innocent person would have to endure this kind of suffering?  
You reap what you sow, Job, and by the looks of things, I'd say you must've been sowing something really awful.

Then, Eliphaz tells his spooky tale, of his middle-of-the-night visitor. Of course, he does the interpreting in real time for Job, and the message he wants Job to receive is this: If you are

really right with God, you have nothing to worry about. But if you get to thinking you're something special, Job, then it's really no surprise that God would bring you back down to size.

Scary, right? This kind of logic is then spoken to Job, in beautiful poetry, for dozens of chapters. Talk about kicking a guy when he's down! And to make matters worse, Job recognizes the things his friends are saying to him - he's said them all before to others. Before he was the one suffering, he would've also thought these were helpful things to say to someone.

The good news is that in the end of this cautionary tale, God vindicates Job in front of his friends. This becomes a tale of a shifting cultural world view. Scholar Gustavo Guitierrez describes as the shift that happens in Job's story as a move away from an acquisitive consciousness or the idea that you get what you deserve from God, a shift away from a doctrine of retribution in which God seeks to punish and destroy. A shift away from the idea that wealth and comfort are signs of God's favor and poverty, sickness or suffering are signs of God's wrath.

Job's friends don't let this shift happen without a fight. In his book *On Job*, Gutierrez suggests that in their discourse, "The friends believe in their theology rather than the God of their theology." But Job persists in his case that while his is not perfect, he has not been sinful such that he deserves the suffering he experiences. He takes up the cause of all who suffer and insists that God is a God of gratuitous love. He insists that he can express his grief and suffering, even with passion and anguished cries, without abandoning his faith in God or his belief that God loves him. In Job's persistence, Satan is proven wrong and God reveals the possibility of genuine relationship between God and humanity, between God and creation.

Gutierrez wrote his book on Job in the 1980s, but his message for us as we receive Job's story - spookiness and all - remains relevant. He writes, Our task here is to find words with which to talk about God in the midst of the starvation of millions, the humiliation of races regarded as inferior, discrimination against women, especially women who are poor, systematic social injustice, a persistent high rate of infant mortality, those who simply "disappear" or are deprived of their freedom, the sufferings of people who are struggling for their right to live, the exiles and the refugees, terrorism of every kind...

I invite we who follow Jesus to consider this week the tale of Job and his friends and to consider when, in the absence of the right words in the face of the suffering of others, the wiser approach may be to sit, to listen, to endure alongside one another in solidarity and discomfort, and to be open to the possibility that we do not already understand everything about who God is.

Amen.

**Special Music**

*For the Mountains Shall Depart*

*Mendelssohn (Erik Doucette and Diane Gronewold)*

For the mountains shall depart,  
and the hills be removed;  
but Thy kindness shall not depart from me;  
neither shall the covenant of Thy peace be removed

**Prayers (Laura)****The Lord's Prayer****Benediction (Rachael)****Postlude**