

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Story of Our Lives...and God

(Growing through Job's story)

A Friend in Need, Indeed

(Elihu, part 1, Job 32-37)

Study #8

Introduction: Just paying dues...

If you want the delight of...
 ...walking with your children through the stages of their growing up years, watching them walk and then run and then read and write and throw and catch and drive and date and all the rest then...
 ...you've got to first get up at 2:30am night after night and rock your infant back to sleep. You've got to pay your dues.

My across-the-street neighbor, George, used to tell me - rather insensitively, I thought at the time - when I told him my late-night tales of infant woe, "*Smith, you're just paying your dues.*"

Or, if you want an airline to give you the perks of relatively cheap upgrades to business class and to be treated like royalty in airport lounges, you first have to fly a lot of miles on that airline.

And if you want to be someone who can speak hope into the soul of your suffering friend, there is, first, a price to be paid.

I know you who are here today well enough to know that you want to be a help to your friends when they are in pain.

You want to be one of those people to whom your friend turns when their life crumbles.

Well, today is for you. Today we get to meet a new character in Job's drama. His name is Elihu, and he was a helpful friend to our friend, Job.

We're going to pay special attention to the "dues" Elihu paid that paved the way for him to help Job.

Reviewing Job...previewing Elihu...

We have seen the mess that Job's three friends made while interacting with Job.

Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar missed helping Job by a relational mile. They were perfectly insensitive. And they were also way off the mark when it came to the content of their counsel.

What we learned from them was what NOT to say or do when our friend hurts.

Job's debates with his friends make up the majority of this forty-two-chapter long book.¹ So they had plenty of chances to help Job, to counsel him, to comfort him - and they failed. Badly.

But then, Job failed, too. From the height of worship (chapters 1-3), Job sank to the ugliness of demanding that his friends and God come through for him in the way that he required.

When we come to the end of the debates, these four former friends are all bruised and bloody from having beaten each other up with hurtful words. The three, especially, have nothing left to say.

[32:1] Then these three men stopped answering Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes.

They're done. They've got nothing.

¹ The first two chapters describe Job's great losses. Then, chapter 3 records his lament. That is followed by twenty-eight chapters (chapters 4-31) consisting of sixteen separate speeches from Job and friends.

But I don't believe that Job was done. At the end of his final speech (it was six chapters long!), Job was still energetic, on his feet, flailing away and hoping that someone, anyone would listen to him.

He even called on God to meet him, face to face, in a courtroom showdown. He was confident that he (Job) could get God to admit that He (God) had done him (Job) wrong by allowing such suffering as he had endured.

In fact, I suspect it was while Job was reloading for another salvo to throw at God or his friends that Elihu stepped up to speak.²

About Elihu...

There is a lot about Elihu that we would like to know, but don't.

The author tells us that Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Job ***were years older than*** than Elihu was (32:4). Elihu himself says that he was ***young in years.*** (32:6)

But that doesn't tell us much. *Young* could mean the 20's or 30's or 40's (Want me to keep going?) *Young* is CLEARLY in the eye of the beholder, right? :-/

Elihu was born to God-fearing parents. Who else would name their baby, "He is my God!" which is what Elihu means in Hebrew?

He came from the tribe of the Buzites³ and of the family of Ram. Ram was in the direct lineage of Jesus through Abraham. Elihu came from good stock.

Elihu is a very important character in Job's story. Still, many who study Job's book and story are not impressed by Elihu.

They think that this young man got it as wrong as Job's three older friends did.

One of these scholars refers to *"the arrogance of a bloated fool"* when describing Elihu. One writer wondered if Elihu was a know-it-all who had only recently graduated from seminary.⁴

But there are lots of others who believe that Elihu got it right. Include me in this group.

Elihu didn't know any more about the heavenly wager between God and Satan than Job or the three friends did. But at least as I see it, he avoided the errors of the three friends.⁵

And I think that it is worth noting that none of the friends objected to Elihu's speech. After Elihu finished, Job didn't say a word.

In fact, the next speaker after Elihu was God.⁶ God validated everything that Elihu said. And at the end of the book, when God censured Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, He didn't censure Elihu.

So, I believe that we are to take what Elihu says as good counsel. He is a model of how to speak God-words to a suffering friend.

My plan is to bring two messages that focus on Elihu.

Next week, I'm going to use his words as a template for what we might say to a suffering friend. I want to cast vision for all of us to speak so as to help our friend walk with God through their pain.

Today, I want to highlight the dues that Elihu paid and that we must pay first if we are to meaningfully help our suffering friend.

² Some who study Job view the speeches of Elihu as a much later addition, not as a part of the original book. My own view is that Elihu's speeches are an integral part of the book's original purpose and were not later add-ons.

³ Uz and Buz were brothers who were also descendants of Abraham. (Genesis 22:21) Job himself lived in the land of Uz (Job 1), perhaps indicating that Job lived some (not many) generations after Abraham.

⁴ If we view Job as a paragon of faithful endurance through suffering (which I don't), then we see Elihu as an angry, self-inflated young man who only intensifies Job's unjust suffering. If, though, as I believe, Job is a believer who has lost his confidence in God's justice and care and has need to repent, Elihu is best seen as God's inspired spokesman and Job's longed-for mediator / advocate. (9:33; 16:19; 19:25)

⁵ See 32:8, 18; 33:3-4; 36:2-4 for Elihu's claim to divine inspiration.

⁶ We see Elihu as the LORD'S forerunner, preparing Job to hear what God will soon say.

The Elihu chapters in Job's book (32-37) consist of four independent speeches.⁷

In speeches two and three, he told Job that God is just AND that God is justified in not explaining to people why He does what He does.

Speech four affirmed that all creation is subordinate to God's sovereign rule.

But in what we'll see today in his first speech, Elihu explains WHY he is speaking.

It's pretty clear that a big part of why Elihu is speaking is that he is angry. Three times in three verses (Job 32:2, 3, 5) the author explicitly tells us that Elihu was angry. He was, first, angry at Job.

Speaks As a Man Possessed

Possessed by Anger (32:1-5)

Angry with Job

[32:2] But the anger of Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram burned against Job; his anger burned because he justified himself before God.

When we left Job at the end of his eighth speech (Job 26-31), we were convinced that Job had lived an exemplary life. He helped the poor and the weak. He gave aid to widows and orphans.

All of this we learn from Job. But Job went a step too far in his self-defense.

Maybe it was because his friends pushed him too hard to admit to sins he hadn't committed. Or maybe it was because he felt that whatever his sins were, his punishment far outweighed the crime.

⁷ Some comments are aimed at Job's still-present friends. The content, though, is all for Job.

Whatever the cause, by the end of the debates Job was out for vindication. He demanded that everyone - his friends, God! - admit that he was righteous. Or, as we read it here, "***he justified himself before⁸ God.***"

The younger man, Elihu, knew that this self-justifying mindset was pathological.

There is a problem when someone's main aim is to prove to everyone else that he's right and that they are wrong. It's ridiculously problematic when someone's aim is to convince God that He (the Creator) is wrong and that he (the created) is right.

That was what Job was saying and that's the biggest reason for Elihu's anger. But Elihu wasn't only angry with Job.

Angry with the three friends

[3] And his anger burned against his three friends because they had found no answer, yet had condemned Job.

Evidently, Elihu had been listening to the debates. Others may also have been listening as Job and friends went at it.

We wonder if Elihu had known Job before this scene at the trash dump, or before the trials hit? We wonder if he knew Job's sterling reputation. We don't know.

And we don't know when Elihu showed up. We do know, though, that he had heard the friends' explanations, and he knew that they got it wrong. And we know that he was appalled by what they didn't do for Job.

Elihu believed that friends should be able to help when their friend asks tough questions. Friends should be able to engage. Friends should be able to point their friends to God. That's what friends do.

⁸ Or another translation, "***he justified himself more than God.***"

And if, for some reason, a friend isn't able to do any of that, then the friend shouldn't just default to accusation and condemnation. But that was exactly what Job's friends did - so Elihu was angry.

He has sat silently and waited patiently for the three friends to start helping Job. He didn't jump in. He wanted them to go ahead and get this whole thing worked out.

They didn't, so he's mad. And out of his anger, he spoke.

It's important that we see Elihu's anger. There is something alive inside of him. He's not a calculated academic or a disinterested observer of Job's troubles.

This young man was prompted by anger...and by something else. There was a pressure from God to speak.

Now, of course he was cautious about speaking. After all, the other men were so much older. Here are his first words.

Possessed By a Burden from God (32:6-22)

The caution of youth (vv. 6-7, 9)

**[6b] "I am young in years and you are old;
Therefore I was shy and afraid to tell you what I think.**

**[7] "I thought age should speak,
And increased years should teach wisdom...**

It was commendable for Elihu to wait to speak. It is respectful for youth to wait for age to give answers. So, he waited - and he waited and he waited.

Finally, he saw that there was something weightier than years.
Something weightier than years (v. 8)

**[8] "But it is a spirit that is in mankind,
And the breath of the Almighty gives them understanding.**

There was something going on INSIDE of Elihu that made him a fit speaker. He wasn't some academic, sitting up in his ivory tower. NO! His spirit, his *human* spirit, was all stirred up, energized by "***the Almighty.***"

Elihu will now claim to have a greater wisdom than his elders have shown.⁹ Picture Elihu as a shaken can of Coke. He's about to burst! He can't keep silent, so he's going to speak. He'll bring light to Job's darkness.

Elihu's pressure to speak (vv. 16-22)

**[16] "Should I wait, because they are not speaking,
Because they have stopped and no longer answer?**

**[17] "I too will give my share of answer,
I also will tell my opinion.**

**[18] "For I am full of words;
The spirit within me compels me.**

**[19] "Behold, my belly is like unvented wine,
Like new wineskins it is about to burst.**

**[20] "Let me speak so that I may get relief;
Let me open my lips and answer.**

Have you ever felt like Elihu does? That you MUST speak? You feel like you can't wait to engage?

And you want to bring light to your friend's darkness. And you can picture yourself being God's instrument to bring blessing and healing and insight to your friend.

First step? Learn from Elihu and be present. Be emotionally present. I say this because it is possible to be with someone without really being with them.

I've been there and I've done that. I'm with someone, but I'm not really with them. I'm distracted. I'm not "all in."

⁹ See Job 32:9-15.

Most of us will admit to having been with someone, but not really. To be present is so valuable - and it sometimes seems - so rare as to be remarkable.

But, if we aren't present, whatever we have to say will fall flat. We'll be as effective in helping our friend as Eliphaz was in helping Job.

If you want to be your friend's Elihu, pray and wait and then pray some more until your concern and love for your friend wells up inside you, until you've got to speak, or you'll explode.

We keep on listening. And, as we listen, we keep on learning.

What he does in speaking to Job isn't complicated. It's actually very straightforward. What he does is something that all of us can do. He speaks as a friend to a friend.

To be a friend is no light matter. Jesus called His followers His "**friends**" (John 15:15) and THAT forever elevates our concept of friendship.

Right off the bat we notice that Elihu does something for Job that friends do for their friends. You may not have ever noticed it before, but after this morning, you'll never be able to miss it.

Speaks As a Friend to a Friend

What's in a Name?

Job's three friends addressed an ISSUE

Sometimes, it is easy to miss obvious things. I am famous at our house for missing obvious things.

I occasionally miss noticing when Kathy re-arranges furniture or buys a new dress or a new car or gets her hair cut. Stuff like that.

Well, I had read through the book of Job many times before I noticed something perfectly obvious.

Eliphaz and Bildad and Zophar consistently called Job names. Abuser. Sinner. Cheat. Scoundrel. One thing they never did, though. They never called him by name. Not once.

Contrast that with Elihu. He used the name Job's parents gave him nine times.

Elihu addressed a PERSON

At the very beginning of his speech, Elihu invited Job to pay attention to what he's saying.

[33:1a] "However, please hear my speech, Job,

A little bit later, he does the same thing again.

[33:31a] "Pay attention, Job, listen to me;

Toward the end of his speech, he does the same thing again.

[37:14a] "Listen to this, Job,

Six more times he called Job by name. And what was he doing by calling Job by name? He was making it personal. He was connecting.

Now, you may think that this is the shallowest point I've ever made in a sermon. I promise you it isn't. I've made much shallower points than this.

But trust me. There is something important going on here.

Jesus once said that the shepherd calls his sheep by name (John 10:3).

Knowing and using someone's name invites personal connection and relational intimacy.

By referring to Job by name he lets Job know that he's not just addressing an *issue*. He's talking to a *person*.

This is not a technique or a strategy. It's simply being personal.

By calling him by his name – Job Elihu nurtured a receptive frame of mind. It put Job at ease, in listening mode. Calling him by name made a connection that none of the friends ever even tried to make.

So, here's my "shooting fish in a barrel" application for today. Why don't we, here at church, work hard to learn each other's names? Let's use each other's names.

Now, of course, let's give each other grace in this. If you can't think of a name, ask. Even if it's the tenth time. Ask.

If someone asks you your name, you won't be offended, right? You're touched that someone wants to know your name.

When I go up to visit at Encuentro, I always attempt to speak Spanish. My experience has been that Spanish speakers love to hear English speakers try Spanish, even if the English speaker mangles the Spanish.

No one will get angry with you if you mistakenly use the wrong name. At least you tried. So, try!

Using each other's name is not the apex of relating. But it's a great first step to relating. And it's a whole lot better than hollering, "Hey, good to see you!"

In addition to making connection by saying "Job," Elihu also made sure that Job knew that he was FOR him. He was not against him.

We'll notice three things Elihu did that gave that message. First, he invited Job to listen to what he had to say.

Elihu is "For" Job

"Job, listen to liberating truth." (33:1-4)

[33:1] "However, please hear my speech, Job, And listen to all my words."

**[2] "Behold now, I open my mouth,
My tongue in my mouth speaks."**

**[3] "My words are from the integrity of my heart,
And my lips speak knowledge sincerely."**

**[4] "The Spirit of God has made me,
And the breath of the Almighty gives me life."**

This is a beautiful, open-handed request for a listening ear. Not, "You'd better listen to what I have to say." Not, "I DEMAND that you pay attention to me."

The sense is, "Please give a listen to what I have to say, Job. Let me bend your ear..."¹⁰ There's kindness at play here.

Elihu wasn't laying a trap. He wasn't out to "get" Job or to deceive him or to take advantage. He wasn't trying to pull a fast one.

He's just got a few things to say that he believes are true and that he hopes will help.

Second, he assured Job that he was a safe person by being non-defensive.

"Job, I am safe for you." (vv. 5-7)

**[5] "Refute me if you can;
Line up against me, take your stand."**

**[6] "Behold, I belong to God, like you;
I too have been formed out of the clay."**

**[7] "Behold, no fear of me should terrify you,
Nor should my pressure weigh heavily on you."**

Job had nothing to fear from Elihu. Job's good friends had just verbally abused him. Elihu will do nothing of the kind.

¹⁰ The NASB includes the word "please" (so does Peterson's The Message) while some other versions do not (ESV, NIV). Hebrew scholars (I am not one) tell me that in the original language the word is not actually present, but the form in which the sentence is cast in Hebrew makes the presence of "please" appropriate.

He welcomed Job to wrestle with what he has to say, to see if Job can refute him, to critically engage. *“Job, It’s OK. I won’t hurt you.”*

There is no aggression. If anything, Elihu was approaching Job like any of us would approach someone who has just been through a harrowing ordeal. He is gentle.

And I love this. Elihu invited Job - and his three friends - to *“taste test”* his words:

**[34:2] “Hear my words, you wise men,
And listen to me, you who understand.**

[3] “For the ear tests words

As the palate tastes food.¹¹

[4] “Let us choose for ourselves what is right;

Let us understand among ourselves what is good.

This is a world-class display of openness. He’s doing what HEB does with their food. They put a sample table up in the middle of an aisle and say, *“Try it out. See if you like it.”* (I always try their food...)

Elihu’s openness will help Job feel comfortable hearing and heeding what Elihu has to say.

Third, Elihu went to great lengths to promise Job that he is out to do good to Job.

“Job, I will advocate for and justify you.” (33:8-12, 31-33)

Job longed for an Advocate

Throughout the earlier debates, Job expressed his desire that someone have his back, that someone be in his corner. He felt attacked by everybody and he longed for a strong advocate.

He needed someone to help out, someone he variously referred to as an *“umpire”*¹², a *“witness”* and *“advocate”*¹³, a *“guarantor”*¹⁴ of justice, and one who will *“justify.”*¹⁵

When you’re down and almost out, you need an advocate. That’s what a defendant needs in court. That’s what a patient needs in a hospital.

Years ago, while I was recovering from surgery to repair a torn ACL, I got a severe headache from what is known as a “wet” spinal tap.

At that time, a good friend was in a position at the hospital to serve as my advocate to see that I got proper treatment. That my friend “had my back” was priceless advocacy.

If you have ever had someone serve as your advocate, you know what a gift advocacy is. Job longed for an advocate. Elihu promised that he would stand up for Job and serve in that role.

Elihu advocates for Job (33:6-7)

**[33:31] “Pay attention, Job, listen to me;
Keep silent, and let me speak.**

**[32] “Then if you have anything to say, answer me;
Speak, for I would take pleasure in justifying you.**

As we will see next week, Elihu won’t fulfill the role of advocate in the way Job envisioned. Job thought that his advocate would prove that he was right, and that God was wrong. Elihu won’t do that.

He will serve as the advocate Job needs, even if he’s not the advocate Job expects or even wants.

He’ll be the advocate who guides Job into truth. And by the truth, he’ll lead Job back to the life he formerly led of serving the LORD. (33:23-28)

Conclusion:

¹¹ See 16:19.

¹² See 17:3.

¹³ See 33:32.

¹⁴ Earlier (6:30), Job (using the word *palate*) invited his friends to test / taste his case’s merits.

¹⁵ See 9:33.

You long to be God's touch in your friend's life, and you can be confident that God wants to use you in your friend's life.

In fact, it is Jesus' plan and purpose that you would be His hands and feet to a hurting world, usually, one person at a time.

That was Job before his losses. And that will be Job, again, before we finish, thanks in part to the role Elihu played in his recovery from demandingness.

Following the example of Elihu, we "pay our dues" and get our foot in the door to point our suffering friend back to God when we:

- **ENGAGE** our friend with genuine emotional investment.
- **APPROACH** our friend as a person, not as a project or as an issue.
- **ASSURE** our friend that we are for her, we are for him.