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This has been a strange summer, hasn't it? We began with restrictions on the number of people who could gather in groups and ended with the mandate to wear masks in public. Although some have resisted making the changes, now it seems almost normal to put on a mask whenever I enter a store.

Have you noticed that what's normal seems to shift over time? For example, at one time it was normal to turn a crank on a phone before making a call. Later it was considered normal to share a phone line with a neighbor in what was called a party line. Making a call from a pay phone was normal at one time, but try and find one today. At one point, normal was having a cordless phone you could carry around the house, but you couldn't take it outside, which seems odd today when our cell phones go with us everywhere.

What's normal to one generation or one community may seem odd to another, as one speaker discovered as he prepared a presentation for a church.

When he came into a new community to speak, he always bought a local newspaper and read it through. If there had been a devastating tragedy in that town, the audience would be in a very different mood than if there were an all-city celebration coming up for the high-school state championship basketball team.

The speaker said that one Sunday he was to speak in Bloomington, Illinois. He arrived Saturday evening and bought a paper. It seems that there are two small towns or suburbs [near] Bloomington—one called "Normal" and the other "Oblong." As the speaker was turning through the paper, he came to the society section, and his eyes were drawn to a headline: "Normal boy marries Oblong girl."

He thought this was hilarious, cut it out and read it from the pulpit the next morning. But no one laughed. The names of the towns were so much a part of their own local language [and sounded normal] that they couldn't see how funny they might sound to the rest of the world.<sup>1</sup>

Just what is normal? As I've listened to the news this week, I wondered: Is it normal for a 17-year-old boy from Illinois who has a fascination with guns to become a vigilante and shoot a crowd member who

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was protesting a shooting in Kenosha, Wisconsin? I don't think we want that as our model for normal.

The victim was protesting a police officer who shot a Black man multiple times in his back as he was getting into his car, which had his three young children in the backseat who also had to witness the shooting. I hope we never get to the place where this kind of shooting is considered normal.

Is it normal for the media to count the number of times a President lies to a nation? I hope in coming years, this does not become the new normal.

I'm concerned that our normal has become skewed, as though we're becoming used to violence and deception, which is not at all what Job would have expected to happen as his life returned to a new normal.

The past several weeks we've heard Job's story: his life fell apart, he endured great suffering, his friends offered unhelpful advice by blaming him, and God came to Job in a whirlwind and pointed out the intricacies of creation. As the story closes, Job

admits that he has spoken about things he didn't fully understand, suggesting that now his eyes were open.

And then, in the sixth verse of chapter 42, we have an odd phrase that can be translated in several ways. As Job sits in dust and ashes (a common ritual of repentance in those days) some translations say "therefore I despise myself"<sup>2</sup> or "I hate myself."<sup>3</sup> Interesting, the word *myself* does not appear in the original Hebrew text of the Bible. The word often translated as *despise* could also mean "reject" or "refuse," but it's not clear what Job is rejecting. Maybe he's rejecting his friends' traditional interpretation that if one is suffering, one must have done something wrong, for they tried to blame Job for his misfortunes. God seems to reject the friends' views and suggests that Job instead pray for *them!*

My Hebrew professor<sup>4</sup> in seminary even noted that the word for *despise* could also be translated as "to be comforted," which could indicate that Job felt

comforted and reassured after God's spoke to him out of the whirlwind.

One author has suggested that the writer of Job intentionally used ambiguous language to leave the interpretation to the readers, to you and me.<sup>5</sup> How might you feel if you were in the midst of this story? How do you make sense of suffering? A bit angry? Calm? Confused? Impatient? Wondering? In a sense, the meaning of this particular verse reflects the reality of life—a complicated puzzle without an easy solution. As we strive to discern the new normal, we realize that life is complex, for we discover that our normal seems to shift from day to day.

Job's new normal brought an abundance of possessions, the birth of more children, and a life of many prosperous years. Even in his great loss, his life had a happy ending, and isn't that something we all long for—living happily ever after?

Although we like happy endings, we know that many people continue to suffer a long time—those who have lost their jobs, those who have been shot based on the color of their skin, those who are

persecuted for their sexual orientation, those who have lost their homes due to natural disasters. Life is difficult, and the story of Job reminds us that suffering is common to all humanity but is not sent by God. Suffering is **not** a punishment by God for our bad choices, though our actions may have natural severe consequences.

God has not sent his pandemic, just as God did not send many other pandemics in history, which have killed millions of people:

- The “Plague of Athens” five centuries before Jesus was born.
- The “Antonine Plague” in Rome in 164–165 CE, which many today believe was smallpox, for which we have a vaccine today.
- The “Plague of Cyprian” a century later (249–270 CE)
- In the sixth century, the “Plague of Justinian” (541–546 CE), better known as the bubonic plague.<sup>6</sup>

Those who struggled through these numerous pandemics eventually found a new normal and a

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better day, just as we will eventually discover as well. Through all these terrible events, the story of Job reminds us that God remains with us, listening to our struggles, accepting our questions, and nudging us to look at the bigger picture. As we wait, wondering when we'll get back to normal, we worship in our parking lot, on livestream, and anticipate the gradual opening of our sanctuaries again. As we wait together, trust that God remains with you in whatever normal you find yourself today.

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<sup>1</sup> Hodgins, Michael. *1001 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers*. Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #680.

<sup>2</sup> NRSV.

<sup>3</sup> CEV.

<sup>4</sup> Gerald Janzen, Christian Theological Seminary.

<sup>5</sup> William Morrow, "Consolation, Rejection, and Repentance in Job 42:6," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 105, 1986.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Yeomans, "Pandemics in Perspective," *Biblical Archeology Review*, 8/26/20, [www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/pandemics-in-perspective](http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/pandemics-in-perspective)