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A loved one is suffering from cancer, filled with pain from the illness itself mixed with the sickness from the chemo treatments.

What can I say to offer comfort?

A friend has died due to COVID-19, and the family left behind is mourning the loss of their parent and spouse.

What can you say?

A deadly blast of highly explosive fertilizer chemicals stored for many years in a warehouse at a seaport in Beirut explodes this week, killing 135 people and injuring 5000 others.

What can we say, especially to those like Hanna who was laid off from her job due to an economic crisis, now explaining her situation to a reporter after the explosion in Lebanon?

The 21-year-old lives in a small room in Lebanon's capital city with six other Ethiopian women. When Beirut's devastating blast hit on Tuesday evening, it blew out their door and all their windows.

"We weren't home at the time, so we are safe," Hanna said, speaking to CNN on the

condition that her full name wasn't used. But now, she said, "anyone in the street can walk through the door and find us sleeping. We are afraid."¹

From illness of our family or friends, to a pandemic that has created a global crisis, to hurricanes and other disasters that tear apart communities, what do we say to those in pain?

It's an age-old question—one explored in the Book of Job. As we encountered this character last week, we heard how he had lost everything—his property and his children. As we continue to hear Job's story this week, his own health is now affected as he sits in pain with sores all over his body.

What can I say?

Three friends appear in the story, who have no trouble finding words to say to Job, for their advice makes up a large portion of the remainder of the book. In response, Job replies to each of their words of advice with his own thoughts, much of the time arguing with them.

2

Eliphaz begins the conversation by upholding the traditional view of suffering, echoing the theology from the book of Deuteronomy that states: “If you will obey the Lord your God...all these blessings shall come upon you...But if you will not obey the Lord your God by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees...then all these curses shall come upon you.”²

In line with this theology of suffering, Eliphaz noted that Job had guided many in need when they encountered challenges, so he wonders why Job doesn’t follow his own advice during his own trouble. This friend said:

No truly innocent person
has ever died young.

⁸In my experience, only those
who plant seeds of evil
harvest trouble.³

Do you find these words comforting? In a sense, this friend is suggesting: You must have done something wrong, Job, for innocent people prosper, and your life is a mess. What evil seeds did you plant to get God upset with you?

I doubt many of us would utter such words, but I do hear a faint echo of this theology from those with wealth who comment on those who struggle to survive day-to-day: “Well, if they would just get a job, then they wouldn’t need to ask for my help. God helps those who help themselves. Why don’t they try harder?”

Instead of seeing God as the one who hands out rewards, some suggest the reward comes from hard work and a fair economy, but it’s not that simple. As one single mom raising her child explained, “I work hard and get paid a good hourly rate, but it’s still not enough for me to afford housing. Thank goodness I have family I can stay with, otherwise I could be living on the streets. I can’t imagine what happens to those who earn less and have no one to help them.”

The second friend to enter the story of Job offers similar advice, though since Job claimed his innocence of sinning, Bildad suggested that his pain must have been due to his children who sinned.⁴

3

Since Job had made offerings to God on behalf of his children, this idea seems to fall apart.

Few of us would offer this explanation, but a subtle echo lies in the reply that I've heard some offer a parent when a child dies: "God needed your child in heaven" or "God has a plan for your child." Most parents cringe when they hear these words, for the idea that God would take a child out of a need in heaven is devastating for them to hear. One parent confessed to me after hearing such words, "I needed my child just as much. What right does God have to take her away from me!? God is full of power, so what need could God have for my child that overrules my need to love my child?"

Zophar is the third friend to enter the story, who suggested that Job could not understand the secret wisdom of God, for God's doings are too complicated, suggesting:

Surrender your heart to God,
turn to him in prayer,
¹⁴and give up your sins—
even those you do in secret.⁵

You and I may not speak these words to someone, but once again, an echo still reverberates today as I hear people suggest to someone struggling in life, "Just pray harder or read your Bible more, for you must have fallen away from God." While these or other spiritual practices can be helpful, one cannot blame misfortune on a lack of Bible reading or prayer.

To each friend, Job argues and objects to their understandings of God, claiming his innocence and chipping away at the traditional understanding of how God works in the world. He felt so frustrated that he cried out, "Perish the day I was born,"⁶ wishing he had never had life.

How many times have you not known what to say to someone in pain? Sometimes it's better to remain silent, to sit with someone and listen to their feelings, not trying to give an "easy" answer to the struggles of life.

I know it's tempting to try and make sense of tragedies, but sometimes we're left with mystery, with a sense of frustration or even anger. So, what

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can we say? Sometimes...a silent presence speaks more than bad theology.

But when we do speak, offer words of comfort, a reminder to one another that God remains with us throughout our struggle, offering a glimmer of hope. God does not punish us or send bad things into our lives, for God only sends possibilities for good. Even when we make bad choices, God never gives up on us and continues to offer us paths to new life.

So...what can we say?

God is still here, even in the chaos, working to bring good in the world through you and me.

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/07/africa/beirut-domestic-workers-ethiopia-intl/index.html>, 8/7/20

² Deuteronomy 28:1-2, NRSV.

³ Job 4:7-8.

⁴ Job 8:4-7.

⁵ Job 11:13-14.

⁶ Job 3:3.