

October 20, 2024

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost

Job 38:1-7, 34-41 (NRSV)

pg. 484, OT Pew Bible

¹Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: ²“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? ³Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

⁴“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.

⁵Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it?

⁶On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone ⁷when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? ³⁴“Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, so that a flood of waters may cover you? ³⁵Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go and say to you, ‘Here we are’? ³⁶Who has put wisdom in the inward parts, or given understanding to the mind? ³⁷Who has the wisdom to number the clouds? Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens, ³⁸when the dust runs into a mass and the clods cling together? ³⁹“Can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions, ⁴⁰when they crouch in their dens, or lie in wait in their covert? ⁴¹Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food?

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word...

OUT OF THE WHIRLWIND

Like most people, I’m a creature of habit. Every day the alarm goes off at 5:40 a.m. When the alarm goes off on my phone, I tell Siri to snooze it for yet another ten minutes of sleepy bliss. When the alarm goes off the second time, I begin the morning routine. Making the bed, emptying the humidifier, having a small breakfast, cleaning up the kitchen, getting dressed, and heading out the door around 7:05. I do this routine every weekday morning. And, even as tired as I am sometimes, I find a degree of security in my morning ritual and routine. I’m one of those people who finds a great deal of comfort in their “to do lists” for the day.

My personality is perfectly crafted for a Newtonian universe—a world in which every action has an equal and opposite reaction; where an object at rest stays at rest unless acted upon, and an object in motion stays in motion unless something slows it down. I like a world where cause and effect can be seen like a pool table. Calculate the angle, apply the right amount of force, strike the cue ball to get just the right back spin, and the ‘seven ball’ goes into the corner pocket while I line up the next shot. I like a world where people say what they mean, where people do what they say they will do—their words and actions aligned. I also like a world where there is justice, where people are treated fairly, where laws are written for the common

good, and leaders have the best interests of all the people at heart. Obviously, I'm doomed to be a very unhappy person.

The problem is, I am an Obsessive-Compulsive, Newtonian personality attempting to live in a chaotic universe. Life is clearly not only unpredictable, but also unfair and unjust. And I'm still getting over it. I have buried too many people who died too young, taken in their prime by cancer, or by addiction, or an act of human violence. With everything that has happened in my family these past four months, it's a wonder that I can form a complete sentence. So, you can see why I like my routines, my habits, my "to-do" lists and daily rituals. Routines are my reassurance that I can maintain some sort of order in the chaos. The small details are like a moat surrounding Fortress Fleischer where everything is predictable and makes perfect sense. One of the main reasons I stay busy, exhausting myself in too many tasks and details, is because it protects me from all the uncertainty out there.

So, when I come to the Book of Job, I find myself greatly exasperated! Job confronts me with my greatest fears in life. Injustice. Undeserved suffering. Unanswered questions. Ambiguity. Uncertainty. Now don't get me wrong. There is much about Job that I like. I appreciate Job's honesty. There is something refreshing about his willingness to stand up for himself against his nay-saying friends. There is something stimulating about his courage to ask the hard questions and confront God when things aren't going the way that he understood things to be. I appreciate Job's passion and willingness to seek an audience with God even as his sores, his grief, and his sense of abandonment attempt to get the best of him.

Asking "why" in a world of risk, violence, and injustice is an honest and legitimate question. Let's not forget: Jesus himself echoed this same existential feeling of abandonment when he cried "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" If that doesn't give us permission to ask likewise, I don't know what does. Though Jesus may offer us the world's most shattering plea for divine explanation in the face of suffering, the Old Testament character of Job remains the Bible's primary poser of the question of "why"—all forty-two chapters therein.

After literally losing everything through a series of calamities—his livelihood, his home, his servants, his seven children, his health—Job sits on the ash heap, scraping himself with a piece of broken pottery, hoping to find some sort of relief from his emotional and physical anguish. Job finds himself at the crossroads of what he has always believed about God and a new way of understanding God's intentions. In light of his suffering, none of the answers from conventional wisdom seem satisfactory anymore. Job's friends assure Job that the reason for his suffering is obvious: Job has sinned. Job must have wittingly or unwittingly done something pretty lousy, and that all of these "afflictions" were the resulting punishment for unrighteous behavior. However, Job was no longer buying into the shallow, pop theology his friends were peddling. He was convinced that nothing he had done could warrant the misery of the present moment. He considered himself blameless before God.

As he listens and responds to his friends' line of logic and the increasing level of acrimony in their accusations, Job continues to wonder why in the world God would do this to him. How can the innocent suffer? Is God little more than an impulsive dictator, inflicting harm indiscriminately upon human beings just to stand back and watch them squirm? Is God the proverbial bully at the bus stop, just waiting to get his mitts in Job's face? Is God the one who taped the "kick me" sign Job's back, with the entire heavenly court joining God in laughing mockery at the sight? Are we simply ants on a cosmic picnic blanket with God playfully giving us the hot foot with a giant magnifying glass?

In last week's Scripture lesson from the twenty-third chapter, we found Job desperately looking for God. He looks to the north, the south, the east, and the west...he looks up and down, left and right in a desperate search for an audience with God. If only God would grant me an audience that I might bring my case before God, then maybe, just maybe, I'll find an answer or gain some sort of insight or understanding into this mystery of misery. But God is nowhere to be found. It's only after fifteen more chapters of complaints and debates that Job finally gets his wish. God shows up—and in a rather startling way. Verse 1 shares: "Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind." After thousands of words, after intense theological debate, out of dozens of spiritual strategies for approaching God, God's voice suddenly resonates from a mysterious and violent whirlwind, the same kind of whirlwind that drew Elijah in his fiery chariot to heaven...the same kind of storm that nearly sunk the escaping Jonah's ship...the same kind of cyclone out of which God appeared to Ezekiel...and probably not too dissimilar from the storm out on the Sea of Galilee that instilled fear into the fishermen's hearts while Jesus was catching forty winks in the back of the boat.

The voice of God answers Job, but not with the answers Job wants to hear. God answers Job with a series of weighty rhetorical questions: Who are you? Where were you? What do you know? Can you? Job gets no answers, only more questions, universal questions that thunder across the earth, intimidating, unanswerable, leaving room for nothing but unabashed silence. God chooses to answer Job in a perplexing way. The Creator appeals to creation itself as the ultimate answer. God speaks of clouds and lightning, water and dust, stars and heavenly beings. God tells of lions and ravens, hippos, and ostriches. I can imagine Job standing there, jaw dropped, in a shocked and confused expression. Is this the kind of answer Job desired or expected from God? Probably not. It's as if Job had ordered the book "Answers to All the Questions of Life" from Amazon, but instead, when UPS leaves a box on his doorstep, he pulls out a Sierra Club calendar. Or Job turning on the TV to watch a documentary on the ethics of philosopher Immanuel Kant, only to find a National Geographic special on polar bears. Coming up next, on Mutual of Omaha's "Wild Kingdom..." the secrets of life itself can be found in the mating habits of wild mountain goats?

Just imagine God's coming down to Ground Zero in New York after hearing the cacophony of voices crying out "why," and responding to those pleas by inviting them on a whale watching excursion. God would take them out into the Atlantic Ocean, finding perhaps a humpback

whale and then say, “There! You see that!? Do you see that whale swimming so mightily, frolicking amidst the ocean swells in exactly the way I designed it to do? Well, that’s your answer, my grieving friends. If you can tell me how I made this amazing creature, if you are capable of imagining such a beast, if you can wield the kind of power that I routinely display throughout the expanse of this vast creation, well then, maybe we can talk a bit more about the whys and wherefores of suffering and evil. Until then, let’s just consider the humpback and let it go at that.

Not very satisfying, is it? It’s almost as if God is glibly saying: “That’s the way things are, so tough it up cupcake.” Or, “hey, if you want to do it differently, go ahead, be my guest.” But I don’t think that’s God’s intent here. Perhaps, we need to hear God’s response in another way. By appealing to creation, God seems to be re-framing the issue at hand. God’s not in denying the real and painful questions of suffering; God’s not sweeping the problems of life under the rug. There is no doubt that God is placing Job, and therefore us, into our proper place. It’s not that there’s no explanation, maybe it’s that we aren’t able to deal with the answers. It’s not that there’s no rhyme or reason to life, it’s just that we need to trust God who is ultimately in charge of all life to do the right thing and bring matters to their proper conclusion in God’s own good time. Maybe, God is inviting Job here to allow his questions to draw him further into the mystery and paradox that is faith itself. A faith that’s real, yet untouchable. A faith that can be revealed in our actions yet cannot fully be seen. A faith that hopes for comfortable answers yet is left to struggle with the weight of uncomfortable questions.

It’s not God’s intent here to bully Job into submission but to enlighten him, not to subdue Job but to blow his mind and ours. Isn’t that just like God? The Biblical record gives us just such a sketch of the way God works. When we come to expect a particular answer or response from God, more often than not, we find ourselves completely surprised. Just when we think we’ve got it figured out, God shows us a baby in a manger and then a lowly carpenter’s son when we thought we were going to see the armies of God marching from the horizon to slay the beasts of evil. Just when we think God is going to run roughshod over the corrupt and unjust powers and principalities of the world, we are shocked to find God dealing with death through death itself, dying on an ignominious instrument of capital punishment. Even the disciples could not believe it when Jesus refused to take up the sword in favor of dying on a cross at the tip off the enemy’s spear.

Frederick Buechner once noted that a perennial fault of religious people is the attempt to be more spiritual than God himself is. God’s thoughts may be higher than our thoughts and God’s ways higher than our ways as the prophet Isaiah observed. But the Bible also bears witness to the fact that God’s thoughts are often earthlier than our thoughts. God often takes care to ponder this earth even as we focus an undue amount of our attention on heavenly ones.

Maybe, then, it’s creation itself that becomes a way for us to find common ground with one another and with God. Maybe it’s creation that reminds us of God’s fundamental concern, not just for human beings but for everything God created. When we affirm the merits of John 3:16,

a verse we have taken as a summary of the Gospel itself...that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...the Greek word for “world” is *kosmos*, which implies everything that God has created. The moon and stars. The birds of the air and the fish of the sea. Perhaps it is creation that gives rise to a sense of renewed hope, for in such moments rediscover God’s goodness and God’s glory and regain our sense of trust in God. Sometimes we just need to be confronted by creation itself. Sometimes, when life is hard and heavy, we just need to go out and take a breath and watch the sunset

When the Reverend William Sloane Coffin was an undergraduate student at Yale, three of his friends were killed in a car accident when the driver fell asleep at the wheel. At the funeral, Coffin was sickened by the piety of the priest performing the funeral service as he spoke the words from Job: “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” Coffin was so outraged he even considered tripping the priest as he proceeded down the aisle of the church. As he was preparing to do so, a small voice asked him, “What part of the phrase are you objecting to?” Coffin says that he thought it was the second part: ‘The Lord hath taken away.’ “Then suddenly it dawned on me that I was protesting the first: ‘The Lord gave.’ It hit me hard that it was not my world; that at best we were all guests. And ‘the Lord gave’ was a statement against which all the spears of human pride have to be hurled and shattered.”

The 1991 movie, *Grand Canyon*, is the story of six people whose lives intertwine in the urban chaos of modern-day Los Angeles. Gangs of thugs roam the street. Babies are born only to be abandoned by their crack-head mothers. Marriages dissolve into bitterness. The lead character’s nephew is the member of a violent street gang. When his uncle asks his teenaged nephew, “Do you still want to be gang-banging when you’re twenty-five?” The sad-looking youth replies, “Man, I’ll never live to be twenty-five!”

The entire movie bears witness to one of the character’s summary of the human situation: “Man, everything is supposed to be different than it is. This is not the way it’s supposed to be.” Through a series of twists and turns, the day arrives when the main characters, including the gang-member nephew, end up visiting the Grand Canyon together. Suddenly and inexplicably, much of what was crooked in the lives of these people gets straightened out. The chaos and squalor of their hearts strangely stilled. Their faces soften in the wonder of it all as they look out across the scenic vista stretched out before them. The scene is silent for a few minutes until one character quietly asks another, “What do you think?” To which the response comes, “I think . . . it’s not all bad.” The Book of Job could hardly say it better.

Closing Thought/Benediction

Madeline L'Engle—“I will have nothing to do with a God who cares only occasionally. I need a God who is with us always, everywhere, in the deepest depths as well as the highest heights. It is when things go wrong, when good things do not happen, when our prayers seem to have

been lost, that God is most present... We are closest to God in the darkness, stumbling along blindly.”