



"Wisdom in the Whirlwind"

a sermon by

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I would like to congratulate you on making it to our final reading from the book of Job, which will actually be a combination of two scripture lessons from the lectionary. It takes 37 chapters filled with Job's complaint and the pontifications of his friends before the Lord finally responds to him in the form of a whirlwind. God then speaks for three chapters beginning in chapter 38, a taste of which we will hear today. The book concludes then with Job's final response to God in chapter 42 and a statement of the blessing that was then bestowed on his life. So our reading comes to us today from Job 38 and 42, selected verses. I will remind you that this response from God comes on the heels of Job's insistence that he gain an audience with God to defend his case of unjust suffering before the Lord, and after he has broken down and cursed the day of his birth, wishing that his mother had never conceived. Our text is from the New International Version as it is true to the Hebrew like the NRSV but in this case a little more readable.

"Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind. He said, "Who is this that darkens my council with words without knowledge?" Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid the cornerstone- while all the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?.. Can you raise your voice to the clouds and cover yourself with a flood of water? Do you send the lightning bolts on their way? Do they report to you, 'here we are'? Who endowed the heart with wisdom, or gave understanding to the mind? Who has the wisdom to count the clouds? Who can tip over the water jars of the heavens when the dust becomes hard and the clods of earth stick together? Do you hunt the prey for the lioness and satisfy the hunger of the lions when they crouch in their dens or lay in wait in a thicket? Who provides food to the raven when its young cry out to God and wander about for lack of food?..." (42) "Then Job replied to the Lord: "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. You asked, 'who is this that obscures council without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things too wonderful for me to know. You said, 'listen now, and I will speak; I will question you and you shall answer me.' My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

Given the context of the book of Job, this speech from God gives us little comfort at first glance and seems a touch out of place. After all, we the reader up to this point have taken our seat beside Job on the ash heap for quite some time- 37 chapters to be exact. Pondering his suffering, adding our voices to those of his friends the inquisitors who seek to find any possible explanation for this situation that has caused their brother in the faith, a virtuous and righteous man, to doubt his value as a child of God and to lament not only the day of his birth, but every element of creation that played a hand in bringing him into this world, "I loathe my life...why did you bring me forth from the womb?" He said. "Would that I had died before any eye had seen me...(and I were) carried from the womb to the grave...then let me alone, that I may find a little comfort before I go, never to return to the land of gloom and deep darkness" (10:18). We've also joined the ranks of a courtroom audience awaiting a word of wisdom from the judge who seems to be out on permanent study leave or something as Job's laments start to convince us in our millennium of distance from this story that it is never too late for restitution for a wrong, or at the very least for a hearing. Though Job knows cognitively the splendor of God in creation, "Look, my eye has seen all this, my ear has heard and understood it," but his role in it is personal so he demands to be justified, "I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to argue my case with

God,” (13:1,3) he says. And most of us would agree that such an opportunity would surely set things right.

But when the opportunity does come, we’re all a little taken back by God. ‘Who is this that darkens my council with words without knowledge?’ God responds. Brace yourself now, for *I* will question *you*, and you shall answer me.’ As if all of Job’s suffering wasn’t off putting enough, when God opens his mouth to speak, finally, he doesn’t give any of us what we want. No explanation, no apology, almost anything would have sufficed, but instead we get...bragging rites? Leave it to God to throw his weight around, ‘Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?’ He says. And we’re left after this litany about creation that goes on and on for 3 chapters feeling largely unheard in our complaint and indignant at God’s response because he doesn’t seem to address any of the critical issues raised by this book. And so reading this we cannot help but want to throw up our hands in surrender to get him to stop, ‘fine, God, you are the creator of the universe and we just have to deal with it- we get it!’ But that’s just it. We don’t get it. We really don’t.

I would venture to guess that God’s speech isn’t intended to just shut Job down. I would like to think that the creator of the universe, of all time and space and full of all glory isn’t so insecure that he has to match powers with an unarmed man. Rather, God is offering a genuine reply to Job. A sincere response that doesn’t qualify or try to explain away his suffering, but that answers his question about suffering by reframing it entirely within the context of creation- not to render it meaningless, but to truly show Job its place in the larger order. In this litany of creation God takes Job’s hand and leads him into the great mysteries of the cosmos and shows him not only God’s great wisdom and creative activity, but also allows him to glimpse the ongoing process by which the cosmos are being birthed and broken down. By which life gives way to violence and then springs forth again. God gives Job insight into God’s concern for the mother goat giving birth on the side of a mountain as well as his desire to level the ambitions of the vain. God who restrains the seas also tenderly beckons human hearts and minds to him. The God of life also watches over death, grieves calamity, and ushers in new life.

But this is more than a speech for Job. This is a spiritual experience. For Job finds himself on the other side of God’s speech not persuaded, but utterly transformed.¹ ‘Surely I did speak of things too wonderful for me to know.’ He says. ‘My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen (you).’ The kind of seeing described is that of the eyes of the heart, not the head. For the first time Job sees his place in a universe where chaos and creation exist side by side, and where goodness and life in everything from the thunderbolt to the ant hill abound between destruction. And God tends to it all and has done so before the beginning of time, and will persist in his meticulous care throughout eternity and Job’s suffering is part of that story. And God is indeed tending to him. ‘I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.’ is Job’s humble reply. There are about 4 different ways to interpret the Hebrew of this phrase, but my favorite way suggests that this is not repentance in the sense of turning from sin. This is repentance in the sense of the turning of one’s heart out of a true acknowledgment of one’s condition- in dust and in ashes- the most primordial beginnings of humankind. ‘I understand myself and you, O God,’ Job says, ‘and I do so as one who is utterly human.’ A human who exists in a creation where chaos is restrained but never eliminated. Where the behemoth and leviathan are bridled but never destroyed. But where goodness abounds. ‘I get it, God. I really do.’

¹ Murphy, Roland E. The Lectionary Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) 2001. P.268-274.

A woman once sat in her living room one sunny afternoon dressed in her best suit as she waited for her ride. She was being taken to the funeral of her son- a teenager who had been killed in a car accident. She picked up her Bible to find a word of comfort and passed over the gospels, over the Psalms, but began to read these chapters from the book of Job. When asked about her selection later she answered only, "I needed to know that my pain was not all there was in the world." We have seen that the wisdom of Job includes giving ourselves permission to acknowledge that the life of faith is as complex as life itself, and that within any one of us seeking to be faithful to the gospel there will be a mixture of faith and doubt, joy and sorrow, hope and despair at any given time. In the same way, in the macrocosms of creation, there exists in the fullness of life both birth and death. Constancy and chaos. We want a God that created an order where there is no room for chaos. Who abides by our rules that only the guilty suffer. Who built us without vulnerability within our bodies and minds to the most difficult and painful experiences of life and dying.²

But what we have is a God who does not abolish the balance of his creation but is Lord over all of it. Who showed us in the cross that he makes all things, death and suffering included, subordinate to the promise of life. Whose creation holds both that which threatens to destroy us and those things that support and sustain our lives. Who demonstrates to Job that there is no corner of his kingdom that is outside of God's care and so neither, ever, are we. And so we believers are left with our brother Job to reconcile with the fact that sin does not always provoke judgment. And righteousness does not provoke blessing. God is not bound to act according to our notions of justice and thanks be to God for that. For if he did we would perhaps be spared suffering in this lifetime. But we would also be marked for judgment and death to be sure for none could stand blameless before God but Jesus Christ.

Most believe that the end of Job was penned by another author from a later time. In the final verses of the last chapter, the author restores all things to Job. His crops and livestock return. He is given even more children and his favor among men is restored. The author makes it a point to say that his blessings are multiplied in comparison to what he had before this wager began, and that his daughters were the most beautiful in all the land as if this somehow makes it all better. But the spirit of the text is appreciated. That life can and does continue. That the God who came before all things and will rule for eternity is also Lord over our lives. That we can find the courage to live beyond the tragedy in our lives and world. That believing in a God who suffers means that suffering will be real for us too, but so then is the promise beyond it. That same promise that pulled Christ up from the grave. That God will forever be God. And we are forever his people and there is nothing in all of creation that will be able to separate us from his love. We do not understand God's ways but we know that we have his heart. This may not give us everything we want. But I suspect that it is all that we will ever need. Amen.

² Carol A. Newsom, The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Nashville, Abingdon, 1996, p. 631.