

July 19 2020 – “Out of the Whirlwind”

Job 38: 1-11

Then the Lord spoke to Job out of the storm. He said:

² “Who is this that obscures my plans
with words without knowledge?

³ Brace yourself like a man;
I will question you,
and you shall answer me.

⁴ “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?
Tell me, if you understand.

⁵ Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!
Who stretched a measuring line across it?

⁶ On what were its footings set,
or who laid its cornerstone—

⁷ while the morning stars sang together
and all the angels shouted for joy?

⁸ “Who shut up the sea behind doors
when it burst forth from the womb,

⁹ when I made the clouds its garment
and wrapped it in thick darkness,

¹⁰ when I fixed limits for it
and set its doors and bars in place,

¹¹ when I said, ‘This far you may come and no farther;
here is where your proud waves halt’?

Message: “Out of the Whirlwind”

The story of Job is probably the oldest story in our Bible; at least 3000 years old.

While Job and his patience have seeped into popular culture,

it’s not a book that gets read very often in full,

and I imagine that you – as I had –

have forgotten some of the details

of this dramatic and passionate narrative.

It’s about a good man suffering...

...but it’s about more than that, too;

it's about Job's feelings of injustice about that suffering,
and about demanding answers from God.

So – the story: it's simple enough, in the beginning.

Job is a righteous man, religious in every way, and rich.

But here's the question:

is Job's righteousness, his goodness and religious nature,
a genuine, freely-given response to God?

Or does he do it looking for a reward?

Through a cosmic deal to figure out the answers
between God and Satan, "the accuser"

Job loses everything:

His flocks are stolen, his servants murdered,
his children killed, his health ruined.

He ends up on a heap of ashes,
scratching his sores
with a broken piece of pottery.

Then, three old friends show up: Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar.

They have supposedly come to comfort the suffering Job,

But they're just cruel.

They look at Job on his heap,
and they believe that he must be the foulest of sinners.

As they say again and again, those who do evil deeds
always receive their just rewards from God.

Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar expect Job to die,
and they squat in silence around him, waiting.

But they are in for a surprise.

Instead of giving up, instead of giving in to his fate,
Job begins to question its justice.

His friends may have expected a silent, resigned death,
but instead they receive the fury of a man convinced
that God is not who Job thought he was.

Job starts to think that God should be rewarding him
for his righteousness and good works.

He cannot imagine why he's ended up with nothing
on a heap in a dump.

While his friends think he's there because he is evil,
Job knows – and we know –
that he had done nothing to deserve
such treatment.

Something is definitely amiss in Job's neat world of reward and punishment,
and he refuses to be silent in the face of injustice.

Job thinks of the world in legal terms of right and wrong,
even though his situation clearly shows that his legal theory has failed him.

But Job's world view, his way of thinking
about right and wrong and justice and injustice,
is the only thing standing between him and chaos;
between him and a world with
no meaning or order at all.

Job is desperate for justice
to prevail over chaos.

And so, he seeks a legal solution: a trial.

In desperation, Job challenges God to a legal hearing,
convinced that if he just has a chance to plead his case,
then he will get back everything he unfairly lost.

Job demands to know why he must suffer
when he's sure he is innocent:

"Let the Almighty answer me!" (31:35)

And in dark moments,
Job's question and Job's cry
are sometimes also
yours and mine.

It's fascinating, isn't it, that a story nearly 3000 years old
still resonates with us today.

We still have the same feelings,
the same questions, the same expectations.
It's so easy to identify with Job.

His friends know far less about God than they claim to,
and they are cruel as well,
preferring to be right rather than kind to a man in pain.
But if Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar are wrong,
then is Job right?
Do we think like Job about justice and injustice?

Do we expect, deep down,
that because we come to church on Sunday
and pray and do things to serve the community in God's name
that our lives ought to go – not excessively well –
but at least smoothly?
Job's story keeps us honest;
It means we can't hold onto the idea that
our Christian faith is
a "dress for success" religion.

So where did Job go wrong?
And where do we go wrong?
Job's lament, like the other outpourings of grief and anger
in the Psalms and other parts of the Bible
tells us that the Israelites had no problem
questioning God or complaining
about God's treatment of them.

So maybe that's okay, for us, too.
We can take our feelings to God, good and bad;
our anger as much as our joy.
We can pray angry or sad or frustrated;

we can question God when we don't understand
or when we feel like the world's gone crazy.
All of that is good.

In Job's case though, there's been a subtle shift
from Job being a man who maintains his faith and his integrity
in spite of his afflictions,
to one who has come to believe
that his faith and integrity and his good deeds,
should have shielded him *against* affliction:
"Let me be weighed in a just balance,
and let God know my integrity!"
Job 31:6.

Job has something to learn, as every human being does:
God is God, and we are not.

At last, though, after 37 chapters of silence, God speaks;
maybe now, God will finally answer Job.
Or will he?

Job wants an answer about the world's justice
or, rather, its lack of justice,
but God...does not seem to answer the question as asked.

Instead, God begins at the beginning:
"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?"
What are we to make of this?
For page after page, God talks about creation;
about the creatures he's made,
the way plants and animals and even the stars
live and move within God's creative
and powerful grasp.

Far from the judge who charges or acquits a victim, God responds as a poet:

“Have you commanded the morning since your days began?”

“Have you entered into the springs of the sea,
or walked in the recesses of the deep?”

“Who has cut a channel for the torrents of rain
and a way for the thunderbolt?”

“Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades
or loose the cords of Orion?”

“Can you lift up your voice to the clouds?”

“Is it by your wisdom that a hawk soars?”

“Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up
and makes its nest on high?”

God...dazzles him.

God takes Job on a whirlwind tour of space and time,
of science and nature;
starting with creation,
from the birth of the seas to the movement of constellations,
from the wind and the rain to the minute habits
of every animal and plant.

God is telling Job: “Your categories were far too small.
You think in terms of the courtroom, of a balance sheet,
but I think in terms of the universe and all creation.”

Midway through this divine answer,
Job is invited to speak:
“Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty?
Anyone who argues with God must respond.”
And Job has nothing to say:
“I am of small account;
what shall I answer you?
I lay my hand on my mouth.”
(Job 40:1-4)

In all this beautiful and poetic response, though...

...God never answers Job.

Job asked about justice,

and God's answer is that he is

all-powerful, all-seeing and all-knowing.

Nothing about justice, at all.

And this is, as far as I know,

the only answer any of us

have ever gotten from God

about why things happen the way they do:

only God knows.

And none of us are God.

Instead, God insists that Job face the chaos of the world

and the immensity of creation,

and really see.

And Job finally does.

In the end, Job replies to God:

"I had heard of you by the hearing of my ear,

but now my eye sees you."

Somehow, he is comforted;

he has survived the whirlwind

and encountered God,

and is returned by God to his good life,

increased in abundant blessing

many times over.

How does God's reply answer Job's suffering?

How is it an answer to our own suffering?

In one sense, it makes the old question –

"why is God punishing me when I've been good"

– the wrong question, or at least,

an uncomfortable one for us to ask...

...because it say more about
our own selfishness and ego
than anything about God.

At the same time, though, the answer that
God is simply mysterious and powerful and not accountable to us
– well, that’s not going to be much help
in the darkest moments of our lives:
when we’re facing down a pile of overdue bills,
when we’re in the hospital room
of someone we love,
when we’re alone and lonely,
when we’re helpless or angry
or hungry or hurting.

And anyway, Job’s not really meant to be learning
some moral lesson from his suffering.
This is not a fable or a just-so story.
He has had everything taken from him...
...there’s no coming back on his own from that.

But – even if God had explained everything to Job –
do you think he’d have been satisfied with a reasoned, intellectual answer?
I don’t think he could be;
I know I wouldn’t be.
When we’re in pain, lost and hurting and confused,
it’s not our minds that need information;
it’s our hearts that need healing.
Job’s deeper need
– our deepest need –
is to know that God has not abandoned us,
that he is still in charge,
that he always cares for us.

What Job needed most,
what you and I need most when we’re hurting,
is a visit from God;

to know that he is still God, and he still loves us.
And that is the answer that God gave Job.
It's the answer that God has given to all creation
in the most profound, intimate way he could
in Christ crucified and resurrected.

The life, death and resurrection of Christ is more, though, than even that:
it's God participating in every aspect of our humanity,
including our suffering.

We may not see that answer to our questions
about why things are the way they are;
but we do see Jesus.
Job's question is never resolved;
our questions may never be answered
with the reasons and justifications and information
we think we want, either.

But Job was comforted nonetheless –
because, out of the whirlwind,
God did answer.
That is the miracle, the good news in Job's story:
God always answers.
The chaos and suffering are still there,
but so is God.
We see our Creator and our Father.
And we see Jesus.
And it is enough.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.