

Out of the Whirlwind

Job 38:1-7

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Some years ago, I was driving somewhere with my kids and I had a compact disc of songs from some Sunday school curriculum or vacation bible school that someone had given me, and I stuck it in the CD player to pass the time. There were a couple of old classics – “Jesus Loves Me” and “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands” and that kind of thing – and then some songs written specifically for whatever this curriculum was. And this one song came on which was basically just about etiquette. I don’t remember how it went, but it was like “we say hello when we come, and goodbye when we go, please when we are asking, and thank you for what we’re given.” And I just started cracking up laughing, because as a pastor, I’ve read the Gospels a lot, and they are full of these strange scenes where Jesus is with the disciples, or a crowd, and then all of a sudden he slips away without saying goodbye and nobody knows where he is.

People sometimes tell me that they are thinking about coming back to church because they have children and they think that it’s important for children to go to church. I agree (though I’m perplexed by the idea that children need church in a way that adults don’t), but I think that idea is coming from the same sort of cultural place this Sunday school song was written from. There’s an idea floating around that in our culture religion is about morals and ethics, which have to do with the right way to act, which is connected politeness and etiquette, and so surely church is a nice place for your children to learn to be polite and nice and well-behaved. These are the things that folks sometimes want religion to do, and that’s understandable. But religion doesn’t always cooperate. Or when it does, you end up with Sunday school lessons that take their cues more from Emily Post than from Jesus. Of course, I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with manners. Politeness and etiquette matter. They do. But for good or ill, Jesus did not regard etiquette as part of his mission. There are plenty of good practices that weren’t part of Jesus’ mission – another is dental hygiene. There’s nothing wrong with it, it’s very important, but if you think that because it’s a good thing surely it’s part of religion, you’re sorely mistaken.

In any case, I bring this up because sometime there is a tension between what we want religion to do for us, and what scripture and theology actually have to offer. And I think that that disconnect

is especially prominent in the Book of Job, which we've been reading these last three weeks. We've encountered Job, the faithful and upright man, and seen him afflicted with grief, loss, and suffering not because of anything he's done, but because of heavenly machinations beyond his knowledge. We've listened to his friends rationalize and hold forth, explaining away his suffering because their theology cannot account for bad things happening to good people. We've seen Job lament his pain and beg for God to hear him. And now, finally, God speaks from the whirlwind. But instead of answering the questions that have tormented Job and us – why is there pain in the world? How can we believe in a good, powerful, and all-knowing God when there is such suffering and injustice? How can we make sense of this? Will it ever be set right, and if so, how? – instead of answering those questions, God speaks from the whirlwind with an entirely different set of questions. Our reading today had the first few, but the questions go on as you continue to read: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? ... Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? ... From whose womb did the ice come forth, and who has given birth to the hoar-frost of heaven?” On and on God's questions go. It is simultaneously a breath-taking poetic text, and deeply unsatisfying for those who hoped we were building up to a scriptural moment where God would once and for all put to rest our big philosophical conundrum, this enormous theological paradox, of believing in a good God in a world where there is suffering.

Some of the authors I enjoy are formerly religious people who have become non-religious and write about that experience. It's instructive, as a pastor, to read about why people decide to leave their faith, and sometimes they are willing to wrestle with the big questions in ways that religious writers seem to be too afraid to do. There's this writer, Shalom Auslander, who was raised as an Ultra-Orthodox Jew not too far from here, who writes really beautiful and heartbreaking memoir and fiction wrestling with his religious upbringing and his decision to leave the community. In his memoir, writing about being taught to see God as terrifying, he writes: “The people of Monsey were terrified of God, and they taught me to be terrified of Him, too—they taught me about a man named Job who was sad and asked, —Why?, so God came down to the Earth, grabbed Job by the collar, and howled, —Who the [expletive omitted] do you think you are?”

It's a jarring summary, but not an inaccurate one. Job is profound, and at the same time, there is something dissatisfying about it. When God finally speaks, our questions are still left unanswered.

Commentator Debie Thomas suggests that there are perhaps two intentions behind this divine response to the human question of suffering. She writes: "On the one hand, God honors and elevates Job by showing up and engaging him in dialogue. After all, what else has Job asked for since his good life shattered? He has asked for God's presence, God's voice, God's nearness.... According to the author of Job, human beings are creatures with whom God interacts and argues. Human beings are free to question God, challenge God, doubt God. Human beings matter enough in the cosmic scheme of things to be confronted with hard truths by their creator. If anything, Job's honest and impassioned response to his very human suffering -- a response wholly devoid of his friends' smug pieties -- earns him the divine audience he craves. At the same time, though," Debie Thomas continues, "God's cosmic nature lesson reorients Job, handing him a more modest position in God's economy. Like most of us, Job organizes his theology around his own experience. He uses his own story, his own pain, as the foundation for his beliefs about God. Suffering does this to us; it narrows and clouds our vision, making a 'big picture' perspective difficult. God's perspective on justice for humanity is not bound by Job's retributive calculus. Of course God cares for Job. But God also cares for the creatures of the forest, the movements of the planets, the patterns of the weather, the currents of the sea. God's concerns are much wider, broader, deeper, and higher than Job's puny mind can fathom, and the way that causality might or might not work in God's universe has nothing to do with Job's wholly human-centered 'if-then.'"

Dissatisfying as it may be for God not to answer Job, I appreciate these two sides of God's response: that Job has wondered where God is, and God has responded by *showing up*. And that Job has wondered why God is doing all of these things to him, and God reorients him toward the vastness of creation, the mystery of life.

Debie Thomas concludes her essay suggesting that the "point" of Job is "Not to be pleased or satisfied, but to be baffled into wonder. Startled into humility. Disoriented into praise. To ponder the unknowable is to be silenced into a newer, wider kind of attentiveness to God and all that God has made."

So to bring us full circle: I think that we sometimes come to church wanting to be assured that the world makes sense. Parents bring their kids to church because they want their kids to be taught a neat and tidy narrative: God makes us and loves us, and we are supposed to be clean and polite and nice, and then God will give us good things and we will go to heaven when we die. There is an assumption, sometimes, that in church we will take the big questions of existence and square them away. We will take the vast and terrifying mystery of existence, and smooth off its rough edges. We will explain the incomprehensible, make the infinite bite-sized. But we don't, and we can't. Not if we're being faithful to scripture.

Instead, we are invited to remember that we are small in the vast scale of things, but precious to God nevertheless. We are invited to marvel at the unimaginable complexity of the world around us, from the spinning galaxies to the crystalline formations of snowflakes. Our questions remain unanswered, perhaps. But we are met in our questioning by a loving God, who comes to us where we are, and invites us to wonder. And perhaps, for that, we might be able to give thanks and praise.

Amen.