

Power, Powerlessness, and Peace (a sermon on Job) October 22, 2006
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Job 38:1-8,39-40: Then Yahweh answered Job out of the whirlwind:

‘Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

Gird up your loins like a man,

I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

‘Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

Who determined its measurements—surely you know!

Or who stretched the line upon it?

On what were its bases sunk,

or who laid its cornerstone

when the morning stars sang together

and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

‘Or who shut in the sea with doors

when it burst out from the womb?—

when I made the clouds its garment,

and thick darkness its swaddling band,

and prescribed bounds for it,

and set bars and doors,

and said, “Thus far shall you come, and no farther,

and here shall your proud waves be stopped”?

‘Have you commanded the morning since your days began,

and caused the dawn to know its place,...

‘Can you hunt the prey for the lion,

or satisfy the appetite of the young lions,

when they crouch in their dens,

or lie in wait in their covert?

Who provides for the raven its prey,

when its young ones cry to God,

and wander about for lack of food?

HAVE YOU EVER tried to describe God in five sentences --a thorough description, not just random adjectives? I came up with these five:

God is creator.

God is eternal spirit, outside of time or space.

God is love that is with us and for us.

God is perfect justice, leaning into a vision of perfect shalom.

God is mystery.

The kicker is the word ”thorough.” Every series of phrases we might put together fails in the face of the answer we have from Job. Here we find God’s own self-description in poetry so powerful that we, like Job, are left in silent awe.

Just a quick refresher on Job, in case you have forgotten the details. This is a book in the Old Testament, a parable in the Wisdom literature, in which God and Satan (not quite the red devil with the pitchfork and tail, but one of a bevy of Satans or angelic adversaries). God and Satan have a little argument, Almost like a bet.—

God points to Job as “the greatest of all the people in the east.” And Satan says, “Yeah, well, if you took all that away, he’d curse you.” So the story unfolds. Job loses everything, bit by bit. His children die. His livestock die. His wife curses him, his friends desert him, or, ultimately, accuse him of bringing on his own suffering. Job maintains his innocence, but bitterly complains of God’s indifference and injustice to him. Job begs to know why his misfortune happened. He entreats God: “Either give me a hearing, or kill me now”

And then, God answers. But not in the way Job expected, probably not in the way you or I might have expected! God does not answer Job’s anguished demanding “why?” God says, “Who do you think you are talking to? Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?” Were you there at creation? Do you know your way around the cosmos? Would creation and creatures obey your commands? Are you capable of providing for animals and birds?

God looms huge, beyond any of our efforts at description. This God is greater than any of our presumptions, greater than our imaginations. This God is totally “other” Other. That is, not us. Not even remotely like us.

And God says, don’t you get it? Or rather, don’t you see that you can’t “get it”? Not everything is explained by cause and effect or by human reason or by the doctrine of retribution. Some things just happen, beyond control or understanding. Pain is inevitable. But hanging on to the pain, dwelling, as the Yoga sutras teach, in ego, desire, ignorance, aversion and insecurity, feeling sad and sorry: this kind of suffering is entirely optional.

This drama is as old as the hills and as new as the last bad thing that happened to you. We recognize our own worst terrors, fears, losses and tragedies in the contours and silhouettes of Job's story: The relationship is over. The divorce is final, the diagnosis is correct, the partner is dead, the money is gone, the friends and family have betrayed me. The job offer has been withdrawn, the house has been sold, the addiction is real. The ice cap is melting, the terrorists blow up children, insurgents keep relief supplies from starving refugees, school kids shoot other kidsand there is nothing whatsoever we can do about it. Why does God allow good people to suffer? Am I to blame for my suffering? How do I make the pain go away? Is there any comfort anywhere?

And God says, “Get over it. You are not in charge.” Theologian Paul Tillach suggested the analogy of boxes. Think of your mind as a small box. Think of God as a big box. Obviously, you can't fit all of a big box inside a small box. Our finite minds cannot contain all of the infinite God. We are limited in our understanding. And in fact for us to presume to understand God is, in fact, to limit God.

Oh I know. We are told that we have power, we have rights and voice and place. It’s a strange contradiction in this world of mega corporations and global networks and nuclear threat and invisible international links and government and corporate spying. The individual has never been so assertive, and never been so powerless. We boast about democratic participation and watch votes discarded at the whim and fancy of a few. We glory in the impregnability of our national defense system and watch the economic center of the country go down under the blow of two commercial airliners. We see rivers clog and air go gray and random e coli kill people who try to be healthy by eating spinach.

Then we turn on our TV and realize that some in the name of justice and on or behalf of justice are now raining down another kind of terror on innocent people half a world away.

God says, "Only surrender is possible." But not the kind of surrender that gives over conscience and humanity to the inhumanity of others. Not the kind of surrender that sits on the dung heap and laments, or curls up and prepares to die. Not the surrender of a victim. That is the way of despair and more suffering.

God's invitation is a way to peace. Because we are asked to surrender to Hope. Hope and despair are not opposites. Both are a response to pain. But despair is response and shapes an attitude of mind; hope creates a quality of soul. Despair leads us to ignore the very possibilities that could save us, or worse, leads us to hurt as we have been hurt ourselves. Hope takes life on its own terms, knows that whatever happens God lives in it and expects that whatever its twists and turns, it will ultimately yield its food to those who live it consciously, to those who live it to the hilt.'

Hope rides on the decision to believe that God stands on this dark road waiting to walk with us toward a new light again, that God who is faithful is eternally faithful and will sustain us in our darkness one more time. When we let go of our despair, we can begin to build a new life.

We must surrender ourselves to becoming conscious thinking members of the human race, forgiving and embracing our fellows instead of judging and abandoning the world. Instead of trying to change what cannot be changed, we are called to surrender to new meanings and new circumstances, to begin to think differently and to live elsewhere. There is a time to let surrender take over so that the past does not consume the present, so that new life can come, so that joy has a chance to surprise us again. And this is what ultimately Job was able to do. In the end, Job did reply to the God of the whirlwind. He said, in Book 42, "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted." And then he prayed for the welfare of his abusing friends. That is when God was pleased and began to restore great blessings to him. Community is restored at the end of the book of Job, and in fact, Job receives back double of what he had in the first place.

Is it the content of God's tremendous speech that heals Job? I doubt it. Job says in his answer: "I had heard of you, but now my eyes see you." A God whom he had only heard about, has now come to him personally. It is not the words or even the picture of power that heals. At the end Job is still a righteous man but he has discovered that being righteous does not protect anybody from the lures and snares of Satan; he has discovered he can hold his own before God, and has entered in a covenant with God which is more like a friendship than like the dependency of a child upon a father.

It is a renewed relationship with God that transforms his profound suffering. Job meets God and Job realizes that in all things his path was held in the hand of a God who was waiting to take him in God's arms and wipe his tears away. Job, and we, are now required to live in a world where nothing is sacred or sure or reliable except the overwhelmingness of God. There is evil and unfairness and pain, but when we look it square in the face, trusting that God has called us there, even when God seems absent, only then does its power dissipate. We cannot count on our own skills, gifts, effort, or dollars to keep all well; We can only count on God to be there when things go wrong.

That's what the Amish families who lost their daughters in that terrible tragedy last week are doing. They could have decided to be angry, to be vengeful, to listen to what the world would have them do, to let their loss determine how they related to others. Instead, they decided to be good stewards of the love, the forgiveness, the hope they trusted and believed God was offering them, and instead of keeping it all for themselves, they offered it to the widow and family of the man who had killed their daughters, by going to the widow and family and offering their forgiveness, their love, their blessing to them.

And then, there was release from the suffering. And then, they had hope. Where is God? Where is Jesus during times when we are suffering? Right there in those places of suffering - right there with us on the dung heap. Preacher and writer Fred Craddock, has said: "To be Christian is to cease saying, "Where the Messiah is there is no misery" and to begin to say "Where there is misery there is the Messiah."

Colleague Thom Shuman sums up the story of Job with this poem/prayer.

we leave our box seats
at the symphony or ball park,
and pray you won't catch our eye
as we pass you
sitting with the homeless;

we wait for a few minutes
at the doctor's office
to get a \$10 shot
so we won't catch the flu,
while half a world away
you sit for a week
hoping medicine
which will cost you a year's wages
finds its way to your village;

we sit in our home theaters,
watching the latest "reality"
on our plasma screens,
while you sit in the darkness,
rocking your child asleep,
as she cries from the ache
of an empty stomach.

Lord Jesus:
when
we want to be at your side
in glory:
remind us where you sit.

