



First United Church of Oak Park

Out of the Whirlwind
Job 38:1-25
The Rev. John Edgerton
March 1, 2020

The book of Job is a fable. And like all fables, there is something of a lesson it is trying to impart, something true about life it wishes to say, something true about God it strives to communicate. And like all fables, that lesson comes only at the end, and can only be arrived at by starting at the beginning.

Job was a man. He was a good man, extraordinarily good, actually; blameless, doing nothing wrong. What's more, this blameless man had it all: good family, prosperous business, good health, plus he was rich. This is how it is supposed to be right? Man does good things and good things come to him.

But then, one day, and for no good reason, it is all taken away from him. His business collapses, he loses all his money. That's okay, money isn't everything, right? Then his family begins to get sick, and he loses his children, one by one. Then his own health collapses and he is left suffering in his body, penniless in society, wracked with grief over the loss of his family, and utterly alone. All for no seemingly no good reason.

It's tempting to think: well, there must have been some kind of reason; some choices that Job made that at least contributed to his misfortune. Nope, not at all. Just to drive that point home, the bible provides four different people arguing four different ways that there must be some kind of explanation, some direct connection between the moral choices Job makes and the circumstances that transpire.

But every single time, Job argues convincingly that he did nothing wrong and that God owes him some answers.

If God really is a God who values justice, that is people getting what they deserve, if God really values justice then God has some explaining to do. And God must have been listening to this whole exchange, and Job's demands for answers. Because God shows up. God comes sweeping in like a tempest or a whirlwind, like a tornado or a hurricane. God replies to Job with a hurricane of words, with a tornado of questions. Job asks God to explain why he has suffered so unjustly—this is God's reply:

Can you hunt the prey for the lion,
or satisfy the appetite of the young lions,
Who provides for the raven its prey,
when its young ones cry to God,
and wander about for lack of food?
Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?
Do you observe the calving of the deer?
'Is the wild ox willing to serve you?
Will it spend the night at your crib?

'Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars,
and spreads its wings towards the south?
Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up
and makes its nest on high?

This is just a taste of it. For 129 straight verses, God asks question after question after question after question - mostly about animals. Animals that burrow through the earth or swim through the water or soar through the skies, animals that are mundane or exotic, some animals that people see every day, other animals which prowl the deeps of the ocean such that no one will ever be able to even look at them. The cumulative effect of 129 straight verses of rhetorical questions is powerful. It is crystal clear before God is halfway through just how little Job knows of the living world and its goings on.

But even more than demonstrating Job's ignorance, God's remarkable string of questions reveals something of the inner mind of God. This string of questions reveals something about what God is doing with all God's time all the time. God is caring for and paying close attention to the animals of the earth. Even seemingly insignificant creatures receive minute attention. God cares deeply about the comings and goings and borings and dyings and hungering and thirsting of the animals of the world. Animals that burrow through the earth or swim through the water or soar through the skies, animals that are mundane or exotic, some animals that people see every day, other animals which prowl the deeps of the ocean such that no one will ever be able to even look at them, they have their own reason for existence, their own worth in God's eyes.

There is not a sparrow that falls to the earth but that God has mourned its dying. There is not a spider spinning a web but that God has applauded its diligence. There is not a honeybee collecting nectar but that God has praised its selflessness. The book of Job begins by asking how a loving God could ever countenance the suffering of people. Job demands an answer, but is shown a truth deeper still: the scope of God's care for what God has created is vaster and deeper than human imagination.

The book of Job is a fable. And like all fables there is something of a lesson it is trying to impart, something true about life it wishes to say, something true about God it strives to communicate. Suffering will come, even to the righteous, even to those who do not deserve suffering, and there will be no clear explanation. This is a true thing about life. It is not pretty, but it is true, and the truth has a stark sort of beauty to it. Suffering will come, even if you are righteous and God will not offer any explanations because there are none. God will not offer explanations, but God does offer a respite. God offers us a vast and beautiful world to love. God offers us the gift of awe and wonder at the vastness of what is living and moving in the world.

If you are suffering, perhaps even greatly so, if you are suffering, I am sorry; you do not deserve it. Don't take it from me, this is what the book of Job - the bible's piece de resistance on the topic of suffering - this is what God has to say to you.

If you are suffering, God will say I am not punishing you, that's not what I do. And if you are looking for some answers to explain it all, God will say I am sorry, explanations are not what I do. But what I have I offer to you is the whole of this beautiful creation. I have made the vastness of the world one great cathedral.

Have you entered into the springs of the sea,
or walked in the recesses of the deep?
Where is the way to the dwelling of light,
that you may discern the paths home?
'Have you entered the storehouses of the snow,
or have you seen the storehouses of the hail?
Who provides for the raven,
when its young ones cry to God,
and wander about for lack of food?

Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?
Do you observe the calving of the deer?

Who has let the wild donkey go free?
Who has loosed its bonds,
It ranges the mountains as its pasture,
and it searches after every green thing.
the hawk soars,
and spreads its wings towards the south?
the eagle mounts up
and makes its nest on high?
It lives on the rock and makes its home
in the fastness of the rocky crag.

This is no academic question. What does our faith and our God have to say to us in the face of suffering? Our faith and our God do not offer answers. And would an answer truly be a balm if in answering the wound were treated only with words and reason? Though we clamor for explanations they do not offer any healing, and God does not give them anyway. Our faith and our God give us instead a source of comfort and respite that never ends, the beauty of the world, full of creatures both marvelous and mundane, each one of which is seen and beloved by God, each one, even you.