

“Out of the Whirlwind”

Job 38: 1-7, 24-41, Mark 10: 35-45

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Job’s story hits us “where we live.” Job and his friends have dominated the conversation since chapter two with lament and advice, questions and indictments. They have addressed and invoked the name of God. But now God will speak, answering Job’s questions with questions of God’s own. We want answers to our questions even when we know there really are no answers. If we can figure out how DNA works, why can’t we figure out how to eradicate cancer? When science or technology or psychology can not give us the answers that satisfy our souls, we then turn to God. Why do innocent people have to die? Why would someone go to a schoolhouse to rape and kill young women? God, is it your will that innocent people suffer? The only way to reconcile the awful things that happen is to bring these questions directly to God.

We meet Job at the end of a long and difficult journey. We have heard bits and pieces of his saga over the past few Sundays. Job underwent a profound “dark night of the soul.” In Job’s life, chaos displaced order, sadness displaced joy; despair overcame hope; anger overcame his peace; sickness overcame his health. His friends became part of the problem because they blamed his troubles on his sin or on his bad theology or both. He listened to his friends, but he did not agree with them.

Everyone else has urged Job to simply renounce God. Everyone else suspects the worse of Job. They have succumbed to the cultural assumption that bad things don’t happen to good people. Bad things only happen to bad people and in this case, Job must be downright awful. God has heard all the complaints. God has heard all the presumptions made on Job’s behalf. Now, God finally responds.

The writer and theologian Matthew Fox wonders if Job’s story can speak a word of truth for people in the twenty first century. With all the turmoil and strife in the world it is easy to feel discouraged about the future. Every Sunday we hear of another person who has been diagnosed with cancer. We hear of young mothers or fathers leaving behind children and families who love them. We may sit next to someone who is suffering from some sort of illness or wrestling with a difficult problem; depression, alcoholism, divorce.

We light a peace candle because we know neighbors and friends, sister and brothers and cousins, who have been sent to Iraq and the likelihood of one of them getting hurt or killed is greater than we would like to admit.

I admit, in many ways it would be easier to just skip Job today. On this Stewardship Sunday it may have been more appropriate, perhaps even prudent to preach on another lesson. So what then does God want us to hear in Job's story this morning? Poor Job. I wonder if I could be as brave or stoic under similar circumstances? Could I ever exhibit such patience or grace? There is an expression that comes from Job's experience, "he has the patience of Job?" Job has more to teach us than how to be patient. Job teaches us how important it is not to give up on God, that we do not have to suffer in silence, that God is big enough to accept our anger and our doubt and our frustration. In fact, God would much prefer us angry than passive. Nothing good comes when we swallow our anger, when we keep silent when we should speak up, or when we humbly fade away instead of confronting our oppressor. Perhaps the question is not can God take our anger, but can we take God's response? When God finally speaks we may be surprised at what we hear.

When Job takes his case to God, God meets him face to face and interrogates him like a prosecuting attorney. God says to Job,

"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 shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb? Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place? Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare if you know all this. Can you hunt the prey for the lion? Do you know how the mountain goats bring forth? Do you give the horse its might?" Job 38: 4, 8, 12)

God challenges Job to be more aware of the wonder and amazement of the universe. God puts Job in his place and reorients him in a way that might be uncomfortable for some of us to hear. Who knows, I imagine it was pretty uncomfortable for Job to hear as well. Instead of a comforting response, God helps Job to see the bigger picture. Job admits "I am speechless; what can I answer? I put my hand on my mouth. I have said too much already; now I will speak no more." (40: 4ff) Later in this interaction with God Job simply confesses "I have uttered what I did not understand."

Many of us speak before we think. We work our frustrations through by rambling on. I have uttered what I did not understand. How often could we make the same confession? We get so caught up in our own myopic view of the world. We are like petulant teenagers who think God spends all of God's time devising ways to make us unhappy, putting up roadblocks to make our lives more difficult. We start to sound like our children who remind us that we must have been put on this earth to devise ways to make their lives miserable. We are not the cause of our children's pain. Nor is God the cause of our turmoil or despair or pain or illness or misfortune. God does not make bad things happen because we behave badly or to indicate the depth of our faith. In the farthest reaches of his soul, I believe Job understood this. In the farthest reaches of our own souls, I believe we understand this too.

When we are in the midst of our deepest pain, it is hard to reach such clarity. When our pain is raw and real, when we see only darkness, when we are not completely sure that there is a light at the end of the tunnel, we are like Job yelling at God (if we even have that much energy left.) In many ways it is refreshing to hear God's response. God does not owe us an explanation. We don't need to have every answer. Perhaps that is why they call it faith. There are simply some things we do not understand and some questions we are unable to answer. Do we then give up on God? Is a life of answers more comforting or acceptable to a life without God? I understand the impulse to give up on God. However, I am thankful, that like Job, despite any pain or suffering or uncertainty I may face, I have not yet chosen to give up on God and God has never given up on me!

I am not God. I did not create the universe. I do not possess the power to do away with evil. Matthew Fox helps me better understand what God is saying to Job. God teaches Job that cosmology—beholding the awe and terror of the universe—*leads* to clear thinking, to seeing things in perspective, and therefore to repentance. He says, “healing is restored when Job and his community see their plight in light of the entire creation. His healing is not so much a matter of sin or blame as it is of *perspective*.”

Job realized something very important in this encounter with God. He came to understand that his world was too small. If our world is too small, then so too perhaps are our souls. The way to heal not only us, but also the world, is to recapture that sense of awe, of praise and thankfulness for our place in the

universe. The first step toward healing is to find a new perspective, to move beyond our smallness to recognize and worship God's greatness.

Yesterday I learned the Zulu word *ubuntu*. Ubuntu says "I can not be what I am meant to be, until you are what you are meant to be." Our partners from the churches in Korea and Colombia reminded me that we are inextricably connected to people whom we may never know. We do not live in a bubble, we live in a vast, wonderful, complicated world. God reminds Job and us that God is God and we are not God. There are some mysteries that no one can explain. There are some things that feel like an injustice and perhaps they are. It will always be that way. However, just as God came to Job, God will also come to us. In the midst of our pain, God is there. When we feel as though we are alone in the world, God will make God's self known to us in some profoundly simply yet transforming way. Can we move beyond our need to have all the answers to simply give thanks for the gifts that are ours? Can we enlarge our souls to love as richly and deeply as our brother Job?

*Ubuntu* leads us to honoring one another and 'honor' is another word for 'reverence,' and reverence comes from awe. We honor each other when we know that others have as much to teach us as we think we have to teach them. We honor each other when we see the value and worth in all cultures, when we acknowledge the wisdom we share instead of focusing on that which makes us different.

Job found healing not by getting answers to his questions, but in acknowledging his connection to all things and recapturing his sense of awe. Job found healing when despite his weeping and gnashing of teeth, God came to him in a whirlwind with a power more profound than answers to his questions. Regardless of what happened, Job trusted in God's love. In the end, Job came to understand the meaning of true blessing. Out of the whirlwind, God speaks to us. May such an encounter lead us to a more profound sense of gratitude for all that God has created and all that God is doing in the world. May it be so! Amen

Source:

"Cosmology as Liberation: A Lesson from Job," excerpted from *Creation Spirituality*, (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), pp. 147-150.