

You Understand it All, Do You?
(Job 38:1-7, 42:1-6.)

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One of the things we have passed over during the last few weeks is the scheduled alternative readings on Job. I feel remiss about this, because I think Job is a very difficult, yet rewarding book.

And one reason for this is because it provides a firm corrective to readings that leave us sometimes believing that we know more than we really do and speaking with more authority than we really have.

Sometimes, when people are trying to guide or comfort us, or vice versa, things will be said that leave us thinking, “How convincing you sound about something you can’t possibly know.”

Brief Outline

The reading you heard this morning is from near the end of the Book, so let me fill you in with the briefest outline of what leads up to it. At the beginning of the story, Job is a very faithful and a very successful man. He has everything he could want. God is very pleased with Job and lifts him up before Satan as a shining example of unshakeable faith. Unimpressed, Satan suggests that Job’s faith is not at all unshakeable; that he is only really faithful, because God has blessed him with

success. Furthermore, he challenges God to a wager of sorts. He bets that, if God will inflict severe loss and suffering on Job, that Job will show himself to be unfaithful; he will turn and curse God to his face.

So, God takes him up on the challenge and inflicts Job with tragedy upon tragedy, taking away every good thing Job has ever acquired or been blessed with by God, even his family.

Job's friends, who see themselves as insightful students of God, take a horrified interest in what is happening to him and come to the conclusion that, since a God who is just would only give people what they deserve, Job must have done something terribly wrong. They take a certain satisfaction in believing that this must be so. If you are good, things will go well for you. And if you are bad, then things will end up going badly for you. And there are many psalms and proverbs that make us feel better in the face of life's unfairness, by making just this claim.

But Job is not satisfied with this answer and he remains adamant, throughout the book, that he really has done nothing to deserve the terrible suffering that has been heaped on him. And because we listeners were privy to God's conversation with Satan at the beginning,

we know that he is right; that God lifted him up before Satan as the most righteous and faithful person God could point to.

And so, God is vindicated, because even after all that happens, Job has refused to speak ill of or reject God. But Job still wants to know the answer to the age old question “Why?” He very badly wants God to at least explain to him why all these terrible things have happened to him. He wants to understand.

The Whirlwind

A storm arises. It is a powerful and awesome storm; a whirlwind. And God speaks to Job from the storm and begins to question him in what I think can only be an intimidating and fear inducing tone; sort of like the deep voice of James Earl Jones amplified through an echo chamber of wind and thrashing branches (voice)

"Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Pull yourself together and answer me. . . Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding."

And as with any terrifying storm, it seems to go on and on, as God holds Job to the spot, questioning him like this for several chapters. It is like a parent delivering a tongue-lashing to a child, until the emotion has run its course.

Or maybe God questions Job more the way an angry Einstein might question an impudent high school physics student, who just got an A on his physics test. Now, suddenly, the young student presumes to be an expert in the field, ready to be taken seriously by the top people in the field. The young student is shaken when the kindly professor, who has always been so helpful, is suddenly incensed by this presumptuous behavior and dramatically proceeds to put him in his place, back in Physics 101.

In this case, it is God standing before Job, but it could be any one of us standing before God. “Were you there” asks God,

“when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements--surely you know! Can you send forth lightning?...Who put wisdom into your inward parts, or gives understanding to the mind? Who has the wisdom to number the clouds?”

God goes on and on like this. And we know that the honest answers Job must give to each of God’s questions is, “I don’t know. You are asking me about things that are beyond my abilities and that I have no access to.”

And the effect of the tongue-lashing is to make it perfectly clear to Job that in the face of the immensity and power of God’s creation, he

knows almost nothing, and can never know more than has been given to him to know, in his human limitation.

And when the storm subsides, Job sees the futility of believing that he could really comprehend God's ways. And finally, shaken and humbled by all that the storm has revealed to him, he answers in the only way he can, saying:

I have uttered what I did not understand, things that...I did not know... But now my eye sees you; therefore I take back my words and repent in dust and ashes.

Some translations say "therefore I "despise" or "abhor" myself. But what is clear in all of them is that what Job has seen is so beyond his capacity to get his mind around, that he is reduced to silence and utter humility before God.

The Storm of Life

If you have ever been through a hurricane or a really big storm, I think you can understand why Job was rendered speechless. There is that sense of awe before such a massive show of force, and an utter helplessness in knowing that, if you open the door or the wind turns against you, your life, with all of the concerns and obligations and plans that seemed so large and all-consuming before the start of the storm, will end in an instant.

And part of what we tells us is that the world only revolves around us inside our own heads. What the world actually revolves around is our Creator into whose reality we have been placed. And often it takes some demonstration of God's power to reveal to us that we are like so many little ants, thrown into utter confusion, if someone so much as blows us of the scent of the little ant trails that we follow.

I think that life is itself like one big storm. The older I get, the more I realize that so much of what I experience is out of my control and beyond my understanding. That, rather than being the master of my own destiny, I have been doing my best to "tack my way through a storm". Sure, I'm fairly familiar with the ant trail that civilization has created to guide me safely to port. And my mind is full of convictions and explanations. But to what degree do my thoughts really give a fair or even real accounting of such an immense reality?

Basic Humility

The basic humility of Job is something I think we could use more of in our society today. Because there are voices all around us, in the media and in our politics or moral, even in our religious discussions who like Job's "friends" are busy explaining things to us with total conviction, as

though they somehow have an omniscience or total grasp of reality that only belongs to God. And sometimes, we hear ourselves speaking the part of his friends.

The Culture Wars

Take the arguments in the “culture wars” that are raging so fiercely now. On the one hand, you have people railing against those “politically correct liberals” who are trying to “cancel out” anything that doesn’t fit the approved view of the world. They are taking away our cherished symbols, turning our work-oriented culture into a welfare system and vilifying our history, even putting an end to Christmas. We need to take back our lives from the urban elites.

And on the other side of the spectrum, you have people raging against those “conservative fascists” who seem bent on giving the establishment the middle finger, and destroying our institutions, while offering no solutions. And the finger of blame here is leveled at a rural population that is portrayed as ignorant and easily manipulated.

My guess is that there is a certain amount of truth behind all of these viewpoints, but I’ve spent enough time with people across the spectrum to know that they are also crude and misleading caricatures

of a reality that is far more complicated. I know this because I recognize myself being misrepresented in them all the time.

To my mind, the degree of certainty with which the arguments are made, on both sides of this cultural divide pose some thundering questions: How are you able to speak with such certainty about those people? Did you personally grow up and do you presently live in all 50 states and in both urban and rural environments at the same time? Can you see directly into the minds and hearts of the people you are condemning? Have you read everything that has been published on American culture that is relevant to these questions? Can you vouch for the total honesty of the editorialists you go to for your information? Are you so well trained in statistics and social theory that you have an infallible grasp of what is happening to us?

And the answer to these questions, if we are honest before God, is “no”. “You are asking me things that are beyond my limited capabilities. I am only a little ant following an ant trail that has been set before me, and I should probably scale down the certainty and authoritative attitude with which I state my views.”

God's creation is so overwhelming in its intricacies and variety and our capacity to see into its inner workings is so fallible and limited, that we could all use a reminder now and then of how little we know, and how delusional it is to think that any one of us can speak with the total certainty that can only belong to God.

Humility

I don't think it is a bad thing, as human beings, to have to accept that definitive answers to many pressing questions are not available to us. Certainty, to my mind, is like a kind of self-inflicted blindness. It prevents us from seeing anything other than what we have already decided must be true. I think that certainty causes us to look at the world and see in it only a mirror of ourselves.

But God's creation is so immense and varied and life is so like a storm whose magnitude defies our grasp. And when we acknowledge that there are limits to our understanding and to what we can honestly say, our judgements become less sweeping and our condemnations more measured. We find ourselves less given to combat and more given to silence and to listening and waiting for understanding. And the intervals of silence are precious, because they make space for God to speak.

I'm not suggesting that we ignore the big picture of what is going on around us. Just that I think these are times in which we should all choose carefully the bandwagons we jump on, and even then be selective about what talking points we are willing to parrot.

What I find interesting about the Book of Job is that, after Job finally accepts that he will never get the answer he seeks, he prospers all over again. God bestows twice as much blessing on him, as he had received before it all began. And this must be in part because there is a peace and blessing that comes with accepting and living within the proper scope of our limitations.

I'm not sure what to make of this ending to Job. Perhaps there is an answer that comes to him in the silence that follows the storm, some wordless affirmation that just comes to him. And if that wordless affirmation could be spoken, my guess is that it would be what we mean by the word "love" in all its fullness. In spite of all the ups and downs, there is a beauty that is given to those who hold their faith, that somehow makes it all worth it, in the end. Or so I choose to believe. For such is the promise of God.