

Out of the Whirlwind

“Then Yahweh answered Job out of the whirlwind.” In a book full of powerful, if occasionally impenetrable, poetry, this one line has become one of the best known. For those of us who grew up or spent significant time in the Tornado Alley of the southern Midwest, the phrase immediately brings to mind the power and terror of the tornado. For those of you who’ve spent your lives in regions where the weather is less violent, I don’t know that I can adequately express the sense of both mundane routine and stomach-dropping fear that accompanies the blare of the warning siren during tornado season. I heard those sirens so often in my years in St. Louis and Louisville that they sometimes came to seem more of a nuisance than a life-saver. I remember being hustled down to the basement furnace room by my worried parents and, in turn, crouching with my children in a bathroom when no basement was available. I’ve never been close enough to an actual tornado to feel its powerful winds and suction but, once, as a nervy teenager, I lingered outside at home under the sickly yellow-green sky that presages a twister long enough to see, or at least fancy I saw, a funnel cloud in the distance before bolting for safety. I’ve driven or walked through neighborhoods in the aftermath of a touchdown and seen the incredible destruction. When Connie and I moved to the Crescent Hill neighborhood of Louisville in 1984, when I began my sojourn at Southern Seminary, neighbors pointed out the remaining scars from the Great Tornado of 1974, which had rearranged so many neighborhoods and lives.

In his excellent volume on Job for the “New International Biblical Commentary,” Gerald Wilson points out that the Hebrew word used in the Scripture, *se arah*, does not refer to the tornado but rather to a strong wind in a storm. Again, this is a familiar image to me. The even more common, moderated violence of the thunderstorm in the Midwest and South engenders a different reaction in those who’ve become accustomed to it. You don’t really want to be exposed to the direct power of the storm but seen from the safety of indoors or even from a porch, it can be quite enjoyable. A thunderstorm during the day means to me the opportunity to wonder at the wild beauty of God’s creation, while a thunderstorm at night suggests cozy cuddling and sound sleeping.

I dwell on these different images this morning because to me they evoke two rather different pictures of God and open up the possibility of a spectrum of responses to our Scriptures for this morning, the final chapters of Job in which God speaks to the protagonist. For me, the God who would speak from a tornado seems to be a capricious, destructive and angry God, rather like the one espoused by Job’s less-than-comforting friends. God who speaks in the wind of a thunderstorm, on the other hand, strikes me as one who is mighty and not to be taken for granted but whose power is restrained enough to allow humanity to shelter and be comfortable in the face of that power and to appreciate both the storm and its fruits – a blessed break from the heat of summer, for example, and the life-giving rain upon the fields. I hope these images will resonate with you as we consider some different interpretations of the words of God to Job and how it is that this interaction with Yahweh moved Job into the final stage of his journey through grief – acceptance. With reference to the work of many wonderful commentators, I want to present four interpretations of chapters 38-42 as being revelatory of the Majesty of God, the Glory of God, the Self-Limiting of God, and the Loving Presence of God.

The first interpretation, related to the majesty of God, is probably the most common. Here, God is the God of the Tornado, violently rebuking Job for his audacity in questioning God’s actions or motives, and Job is the quivering, sniveling sinner, crouched on his ash heap in remorse. It’s a

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pretty easy conclusion at which to arrive, given the power of the Scripture. Listen again to the opening verses of chapter 38 and Job's initial response, early in chapter 40: "Then the LORD 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."'" "Then Job answered the Lord: "See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth.'" I'm exaggerating my reading, of course, to make the point. For generations of readers and preachers, the response of God to Job has been a protracted lecture on "It's none of your darn business!" Conservative preachers have used these verses as proof-texts to buttress their top-down view of the world, while liberal preachers have used them as examples of why some sections of the Bible just don't deserve to be preached anymore. Rev. John Shearman, whose weekly online "Liberal Lectionary Analysis" I often find helpful, has written the following: "In a long series of rhetorical questions, Yahweh majestically declares the works of divine creativity and providence. Yet the divine rhetoric never answers the fundamental question. It merely humiliates Job and illustrates the vast gulf between human and divine knowledge. The solution to the problem remains a mystery. Yahweh's relentless questioning never accuses Job of ethical transgressions, but does deny Job's right to question divine wisdom and power."

But as popular as this interpretive approach is from both ends of the theological spectrum, I find it has a basic flaw. It means that God's response to Job is so close in letter and spirit to the responses of the friends that it doesn't make any sense for God to then rebuke the friends and to praise Job as the only one speaking the truth! The friends held that Job brought his troubles on himself by his sins. God tells the Accuser that Job is blameless and upright. If Job has been so well-regarded by God both before and after his suffering, why would God rebuke and humiliate him? While I would certainly uphold the majesty of God, I believe God's majesty to be very different from the imperiousness of a human tyrant. And I would certainly not characterize a frightened acquiescence on the part of Job as the sort of healthy acceptance that I believe he came to as a part of his grief process.

So, where will we find a more comforting interpretation of the words of God to Job? To begin with, I believe we must exercise what UCC pastor Charles Blaisdell calls "tone of voice exegesis." Remember my angry, imperious reading of God's first words to Job? How does our understanding of these passages change if we replace anger with humor or with love? "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?" Gerald Wilson points out that, unlike the interactions between God and the Accuser, when God always has the last word, God allows Job the last word in their conversation, treating Job as an equal and inviting his response. Once we begin to stop seeing God's answer to Job as a scolding, we can begin to ask what God was trying to convey to this blameless and upright man.

In partial answer, I would turn to the words of the old hymn which we sang with such gusto earlier this morning: "O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder consider all the worlds thy hands have made, I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder, thy power throughout the universe displayed. Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee; how great thou art, how great thou art!"

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Removed from the dubious context of stern lecture, the speeches of God in the Book of Job become a hymn to the nearly unimaginable glory of God's creation. In his book, The Art of Biblical Poetry, Robert Alter contrasts the first poem given to Job by the author, his declaration of his overwhelming misery, with the poem written in God's voice. "Job's first poem is a powerful, evocative, authentic expression of man's essential... egotism: the anguished speaker has seen, so he feels, all too much, and now he wants to see nothing at all, to be enveloped in the blackness of the womb/tomb, enclosed by dark doors that will remain shut forever. In direct contrast to all this withdrawal inward and turning out of lights, God's poem is a demonstration of the energizing power of panoramic vision. Instead of a death wish, it affirms from line to line the splendor and vastness of life, beginning with a cluster of arresting images of the world's creation and going on to God's sustaining of the world in the forces of nature and in the variety of the animal kingdom. Instead of a constant focusing inward toward darkness, this poem progresses through a grand sweeping movement that carries us over the length and breadth of the created world, from sea to sky to the unimaginable recesses where snow and rain are stored, to the lonely wastes and craggy heights where only the grass or the wildest of animals live." God challenges Job to look up from his ash heap and to wonder at the glory of the world around him, to stop thinking of himself or even of humankind as the center of God's concern and to instead take his place in the amazing panoply of Creation. Curt Smith reminded me the other day of the old fable about the would-be purchaser of an expensive tapestry who balked at the artist's price when he viewed what looked like a disorganized jumble of knotted threads, until the seller turned the tapestry over to reveal that the customer had been looking at the wrong side. Here, God invites Job to stop looking at the wrong side of the tapestry and to embrace life and the world as God sees it, full of wild and untamed beauty, some of which exists for the delight of no human. Paul Nancarrow writes, "God reveals to Job the working of divine creativity that can also work in him, if he will work with it, to take him beyond suffering to some new realization of good."

For several commentators, this review of Creation also serves to remind Job and the reader of just how "other" God is. John Holbert of Perkins Theological Seminary in Dallas writes, "God is God, and we humans do not determine how God will act, nor are we always the reason for God's actions. In the end, God is holy and other and fleet. The world is God's, not ours." Yet even in God's otherness, God makes room for the freedom of the humans God has created. Both Harold Kushner, in his ever-popular book When Bad Things Happen to Good People, and Gustavo Gutiérrez, in On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent, point to the second passage I read this morning, Job 40:9-14, as key. Here, God seems to be inviting Job to have a go at running the world, at doling out rewards and punishments more appropriately, if he thinks it's so easy. Some of you will recognize the plot of the movie "Bruce Almighty" in this synopsis – I'm sorry to say, I haven't seen it. But Bible story or Hollywood comedy, the message is the same. Kushner writes, "God wants the righteous to live peaceful, happy lives, but sometimes even He can't bring that about... If God is a God of justice and not of power, then He can still be on our side when bad things happen to us." Both Kushner and Gutiérrez also point to the descriptions of the legendary creatures Behemoth and Leviathan in the following chapters. These two monsters are mythical depictions of the forces of chaos in the world; the figure of Leviathan is used to this purpose in other passages in the Scriptures. Job feels himself beset by the forces of evil and chaos, that they have sway over the world. God reminds him that these forces do indeed exist in the world but that they are not in control of the whole world. "There is evil in the world, but the world is not evil. There are chaotic forces within the cosmos, but the cosmos is not a

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chaos,” as Gutierrez writes. The price of God limiting God’s own power in order that humankind may be free is that there places where God is not in control. But the gift of freedom is the gift of the loving parent to the beloved child.

In some ways, however, even the perspective of the greatness of creation and our place in it, or the trade-off between our freedom and God’s protection are cold comfort. Are these relatively intellectual answers to the emotional problem of suffering really sufficient? There is one more element of Job’s experience with God’s response to consider. The key is in Job’s second response to God: “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.” What makes a difference to Job is not so much what God says but that God says it at all and that God says it to Job. Job had heretofore loved and revered his Creator “for nothing,” as the Accuser had put it, but he had done so only on the basis of the stories of God’s presence to others. Now he has experienced God’s presence directly. Job’s experience is that unmediated presence of God of which so many mystics have written over the centuries; a life-altering, unforgettable experience. I knew a man who had such a mystical experience of the presence of God. He described it as being the most frightened he’d ever felt and being the safest he’d ever felt. As someone exposed to a thunderstorm, he felt the immense power which surrounded him, the incredible otherness that confronted him in his smallness, that sense of the infinite against his finitude. But, like a child safely tucked in bed while the storm raged outside, he said, he felt so safe, so loved, that the sensation lingered deep within him many years later.

Throughout Job’s chapters of complaint, the title character has called on God to come and face him, to answer to Job’s charges. When, in fact, God does come to Job, Job’s pain and outrage vanish in view, not of God’s majesty or even of God’s glory or of God’s self-limitation on behalf of humanity, but in view of God’s loving presence. Our NRSV concludes Job’s awestruck answer to God with a traditional interpretation of a Hebrew phrase that, like so much of this book, is less than straight-forward: “therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” Both Wilson and Gutiérrez point out that the word “myself” is not in the Hebrew. Gutierrez also delves deeper into the construction of the sentence and follows a colleague in suggesting that Job is not repenting *in* dust and ashes but repenting *of* dust and ashes. Now that he has seen God, in other words, he is rejecting and turning away from mourning and sorrow. The presence of the Living and Loving God has enabled him to return to the joy of life. Job has been reminded that the Creator who takes such care of the wild places and things that have no contact with humankind cares for him, too, even in the midst of his sufferings. As Jesus was to say later, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

A fellow Baptist pastor, Gerald Mann, said this to his congregation in Austin, Texas: “We have a choice. Evil, suffering, tragedy can paralyze you or you can take the evil and the suffering and you can metabolize it. You can ingest it, digest it, transform it into a higher good. It is up to you and it is up to me to make that choice. All that I am saying to you is that I have found enough goodness in the world to choose to keep lighting candles instead of cursing the darkness. If God is great and God is good, why do the innocent suffer? That is a fair question. I don’t know, but I do know there is a goodness in this world that cannot be explained outside of a God who loves you and me. Ultimately I rest my case on the fact that through this long, dark night of

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suffering—and my suffering has not been nearly what some of yours has been—it is okay to hold up my head and go forward.”

Mann’s words strike very close to what I have begun to understand about the epilogue of this great book. Many people read that God gave Job twice the possessions he had before and just as many children and say, “See, the doctrine of retribution *is* at work – Job has been rewarded for being faithful and God is making up for treating him unfairly.” I can’t agree with this assessment. Instead, I believe that it was the revelation of God’s loving presence in Job’s life that set him free to start again, to take whatever was left to him and rebuild his flocks and his business, to rekindle his relationship with his wife and welcome new life with joy. Yes, he lived twice the normal lifespan, according to the Bible, which could be a gratuitous gift of God or could simply be the tonic of a glad and loving heart rather than the slow poison of grief and pain. From what the Scriptures tell us, Job was moved by his awareness of God’s generosity to be unusually generous himself. In chapter 42, we read of Job’s beautiful daughters and how they inherited their father’s vast estate along with their brothers. Such a thing, of course, was unheard of in Biblical lands and times, where property was only inherited by men. “What is the author implying about the newly restored Job?” asks Robert Linthicum in his online commentary. “Perhaps he is suggesting that through his own deep suffering, Job has become far more sensitive to the plight of the powerless (for instance, women), and is by his own actions seeking to rectify such injustice.” We know that Job had already been a champion of those who were traditionally seen as needy in his world. I’d say that his encounter with Yahweh had made Job a pioneer in equal rights.

And so, we come to an end of our consideration of the story of Job. I hope that you have recognized and been helped by the tracing of Job’s journey through the stages of grief: denial, depression, anger, bargaining and acceptance. As I warned at the beginning, I do not have an answer for the question of why suffering exists in our world but I hope that the questions I have asked and the ideas I have raised will move all of us along in our search for answers. Ultimately, I find no comfort in relying on the majesty of God but neither would I deny that comfort to those for whom it is sufficient. I am moved but not satisfied by the glory of God seen in Creation. I find the concept of the self-limitation of God to be intellectually stimulating but for me it does not speak to the terrors of the dark of night. Like the hymnist, I might say that my faith has found a resting place, not in device or creed, but in the love of the Ever-Living One. To me, this is the ultimate lesson of the Book of Job — that when God’s servant was in extremis, when he cried out for answers, God came and was present to him. So, too, did God come and be present for all of us, as Jesus Immanuel, the fullness of the Godhead in human form, and so God took our suffering upon Godself, and died for it and with it and was raised again to show us the way to hope and life. Does God speak to us from the whirlwind? I say yes, that God spoke in the mighty wind of Pentecost in the Person of the Holy Spirit, who still abides with us today, turning our hearts towards God and towards God’s Creation, leading us to participate with God in the ongoing process of pushing back the forces of chaos and creating the Beloved Community. And so, my sisters and my brothers, let us give thanks for the loving power of God that conquers even grief, the love that excels all others, saving us from selfishness and brokenness and leaving us, in the eyes of God, as blameless and upright as God’s servant Job. Amen.