

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 12
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Job 38:1-11

Lyle McKee
St. Thomas Lutheran Church
Bloomington, Indian

Who Do We Think We Are?

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, in the loving presence of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In this troubling story of Job, we enter in at chapter 38 where God begins to give Job a verbal shellacking. Job has sought several times after an explanation of the charges against him, trying to find a way to stop his terrible suffering. He expects to offer God evidence of his righteousness. But this chapter 38 begins a divine discourse that totally ignores Job's questions. Instead of answering them, God details the great distance that exists between what mere human beings can imagine and the wisdom of God.

It's not until chapter 40 that Job is heard from again. Even then, he manages only to affirm his inadequacy in the face of God's power:

See, I am of small account: what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth.
I have spoken once, and I will not answer: twice, but will proceed no further.
(40:4-5)

Job affirms here that he knows his place. And after a couple of chapters worth of lecture from God, it's no wonder. I'm reminded of the simple sentence spoken by Jesus in today's gospel—addressing the wind and waves: "Be still." It's a far briefer reproach, but the effect is the same. Creation and creatures are humbled and stilled in the face of the majesty and inscrutability of God.

In the passage before us, God speaks in a way that mirrors other parts of scripture. "Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind." As with the association of Jesus' power over the wind, here God speaks from a whirlwind. Imagine, perhaps, the sound of the rush of a mighty wind that stirred the hearts of those gathered on the Day of Pentecost just a few weeks ago. For Job, the words are so powerful that it's difficult to imagine a mortal being other than struck dumb—stilled—by their impact.

[Spoken ominously] 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.

What an interesting way to say, "Who do you think you are to question God? I'm the one asking the questions here."

Those first phrases turn the tables on Job, so that he understands the incredible gall of presuming to berate God with his questions. Job's "words without knowledge" fall silent as God speaks. It is God who will question and Job who shall answer.

Questions and answers play a large role in the book of Job. Job questions God. His so-called friends give him a few bogus answers. Job continues to ask, and finally God answers, beginning with a question: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?"

Direct answers from God are hard to come by:

Question: "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

Answer: "What is written in the law? How do you read?" (Luke 10:25-26)

Question: "Are you the King of the Jews?"

Answer: "You have said so." (Matthew 27:11)

Question: "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

Answer: "Go and tell John what you hear and see." (Matt. 11:3-4)

We are consistently thrown back on our own choices, our own faith. The only answers worth anything come from our hearts, transformed by grace. We are asked to consider who we think we are.

God's words only affirm what Job already knows. "There is nothing about any of (God's response) that is particularly new, nothing that can be remotely imagined to provide an answer to the struggle going on in Job's soul. Nothing is explained. No reasons are given. Nothing is said about the wager with Satan, nothing about God's quiet confidence in Job. There is no justification of the sufferer, no acquittal, no public vindication. Nothing in short, or so it would seem, to stir any love in anybody's heart, certainly not in Job's" (Interpreter's Bible)

So, what is it in all of this that ultimately moves Job to repent? It is simply God's presence. Job, in his afflictions, has felt abandoned and separated from God. When he is finally silent—when he finally gives himself time for reflection and listens to God, he is brought back to himself. He is reminded of his relationship with God. He remembers that without God he would never have existed or possessed anything. He recalls the steadfast love of God that provides all that was, is, and shall be. He simply remembers who he is. "Be still," writes the Psalmist, "and know that I am God." (46:10)

"Be still." "Be mindful of the majesty of creation, the beauties that surround you, the abiding love of God. The suffering of Job is set beside the glories of God and creation.

The problems of our world—the gun violence, the immigrant and refugees crises, the exacerbated climate crises due to a warming planet, the suffering caused by disease and pestilence, poverty—these all cause us to cry out to God as did Job. We yearn for answers that satisfy.

And God says, “Be still. Remember who you are. And remember who I am.”

It is true that there are many evils in this world. But it is also true that we are living in the most peaceful and least violent time in human history. Just like it is true that hunger and hunger-related diseases kill 21,000 people every day and that 1 in 6 don't have enough to eat worldwide. And it is also true that fewer people are hungry than ever before, that through political advocacy and charity, the number of people suffering from hunger around the globe has been cut in half since the 1960s.

From one perspective, the world is on fire with suffering and violence. From another, it is being healed and we are making progress. And it can be hard to hold both truths in our heads much less our souls.

But both are true and each has its own wisdom and gift for our life of faith, and that I think, is the paradox of a book like Job, a book of immeasurable tragedy and suffering and of the most extraordinary and beautiful poetry in all of Scripture.

Job is asking where in the world God has gone as he looks around at the suffering. Job demands to know why God has so forsaken humanity. But God doesn't try to explain it. God doesn't even contradict Job's accusations. Instead, God responds with beauty.

Job casts a vision of a world overshadowed by pain and suffering. God responds by reminding him who he is and showing him the beauty and hope of the same world.

And here's the thing. I'm not sure these are competing views. I don't think the one negates the other. God doesn't respond with beauty to cancel out or disregard Job's suffering. I think that's why God doesn't exactly answer Job's question about suffering. Because no answer—even one from God—is ever satisfactory in the midst of our pain and grief. Nothing solves suffering. Nothing answers it. But neither is suffering and grief the whole story of our lives and of the world. There is beauty, and grace, and hope in the world, too, existing simultaneously, in paradox, side-by-side.

Like suffering, beauty cannot really be explained. Like suffering, beauty can only really be experienced. And like suffering, beauty changes us. For Job, suffering and grief removed the protective barrier of wealth and privilege and opened his eyes to see how deeply suffering, injustice and pain are shot through the human experience. So much so that all he could see was pain and suffering in the world. In a similar way, the more we experience and observe beauty, the more frequently we experience it even in small and unexpected places, in the way a sleeping child tucks her hands under her cheeks at night, the way a spouse tilts his head back in laughter, the pirouettes of a single yellow leaf falling from an empty tree.

But we need both. We need to cultivate both, an awareness of the suffering of humanity and an awareness of the beauty of the creation. We need to experience both

the remote absence of God and the divine immanence of a God who is with us in creation. Because both are true to our lived experience.

Just as Job is pleading with God to look at the world and bear witness to its suffering and pain, God is pleading with Job to look at the world and bear witness to its beauty and glory.

And I think they need each other in this story, to learn from the wisdom and experience each offers to the other. God needs to see Job's prophetic grief. Job needs to see God's prophetic beauty. If all we experience is prophetic grief like Job, we can spiral into despair, paralyzed by the overwhelming nature of the earth's suffering. But if all we see is prophetic beauty, we can spiral into lofty ideals and become so detached from the reality of human pain that we become just as paralyzed. Unless we remember who we are and who God is.

At the end of the story, God is no longer above humanity, but alongside, so much so that Job can say, "Before I had only heard about God. Now I have seen God."

Beauty and suffering held in tension, a dance between the divine and the human, the rapturous beauty and the constant wounding, a courtroom argument between God and humanity in which neither loses and both discover what they had been missing. (adapted from David R. Henson, Patheos, 10/15/15)

And so this is Job's challenge—to cultivate an awareness of who we are and who God is, to know human suffering and to perceive the beauty of grace and the created world. Because where those meet just might be the place where we find Jesus—the fullness of God's glory experiencing the depth of human suffering, hard at work in the world.

When Job is humbled sufficiently to listen to the word of God, he finds that the answer of God to questions of suffering and ill fortune is God. What rings true for people of faith, even in the face of horrible suffering, is the abiding presence of God, the one who is always there, the one who offers grace, the one who has created the great beauties of this world. These things we know as fully as a human is able through the gift of God suffering with us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord unto abundant life. Amen.