

St. Margaret's Episcopal Church
Creation Series 5
February 11, 2012
Job 38:1-17; Ps. 30; 1 Cor. 9:24-27; Mark 1:40-45

It's a strange story, this Job and his laments, there isn't another book in the Bible quite like it. Like the book of Proverbs we talked about a couple of weeks ago, it belongs in the category of Wisdom literature, but it is still unique. The authorship is unknown, the date and place of origin is a matter of debate. It has a primordial, mythical quality to it. Job himself, who may have existed or maybe not, is a type of folk legend, a non-Israelite from the land of Uz, about as mythical a place as Eden. Our Job is the picture of a good, blameless and upright man who gets flattened by a slew of bad things he doesn't deserve. William Brown describes the book as a kind of "thought experiment" that tests and challenges the conventional wisdom of the day.ⁱ That conventional wisdom is that good things happen to good people and bad people get their just desserts. So if something bad happens to you, surely you deserved it. The book of Job repudiates this idea, but it is far more than a simple treatise on the reality of undeserved human suffering. It asks the question that is put by Satan to God in the first chapter: will humans be righteous and faithful apart from rewards and punishment?

The basic story is laid out in the first couple of chapters. This Job is a prosperous, happy, family man, one who feared God and turned away from evil. Then suddenly he loses everything: his children die, his fortune disappears, and he winds up on a garbage dump at the edge of town with oozing sores and crawling flesh, awash in his own misery, as anyone would be. It is all horribly, cruelly unfair.

Job has three friends who visit him to offer consolation. In the beginning they keep silence for seven days and nights, but finally they begin to talk. They talk, and talk, and talk, for 29 chapters in a cycle of 27 speeches, going around in endless circles, rehashing old ground. If you bother to read these arguments you'll see they don't develop, they simply repeat themselves over and over again, though with a bit more literary flair. The gist of the argument is that, since God is just, Job's suffering must be due to some guilt on his part; he must have committed some sin. If not Job, then perhaps it was his kids who had messed up, and Job is paying the price. They are defending their worldview, with all absolute certainty.

But when we get to chapter 38, these friends disappear, and the remainder of the book is between Job and God, beginning with the words from God "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 it to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?"

From there God takes Job on a whirlwind tour of the universe. It is the most extensive catalogue of earth elements and sea and sky and all manner of plants and animals to be found anywhere in scripture. It's tame. It's wild. It's orderly and chaotic. It's beautiful and savage. And God delights in every inch of it.

The first piece of wisdom that Job seems in need of learning, and which is imparted to him by way of this whirlwind tour, is humility. Humanity's place in the

universe presented by the Book of Job is in stark contrast to Plato's hierarchy of being, or arguably in Genesis 1 or Psalm 8, with humans just a bit below God and over the rest of profane creation. (Actually it usually went God-man-woman-beast). Over and over again, Job is reminded that he had nothing to do with creating the world, and that he is a creature among many. The Lord cares for a vast world beyond human knowing, and does not necessarily exercise control over it for the immediate benefit of human beings.ⁱⁱ God reminds Job that God brings the rains to a land where no person lives. In fact, in God's two speeches to Job, God describes a universe almost without people.

So we might ask ourselves whether this might be the wisdom we are called to claim, and the repenting – which as you remember we have defined as “moving into the larger mind” – that we need to own. Today I am joining with faith leaders around the world for a national “preach-in” on global warming. How we see ourselves in the world is key to our attending to this, what I believe is the most urgent and pressing issue of our time. And, as people of faith, we need to attend to the reality that our changing climate will affect the poorest of the poor first. This makes climate change a front-and-center faith concern. Yes, we need earth stewardship. We have a special responsibility to care for the earth, given our singular capacity to destroy it. And at the same time, we need to hold a second idea in tension with this: that we are creatures, servants of creation, intimately and radically interconnected to all life, and subject to creation's laws. Stewards *and* servants. This reminder that we do not stand above or apart from the earth, but are in fact radically interconnected with all of life, is a truth our ancestors grasped but which we seemed to have forgotten, as we commodify the blessings of the natural world, and think of the earth as scenery, rather than as our essential habitat. How might we live, if we understand that the world is of value in the sight of God all by itself, whether it serves us or not?

We know we can live in ways that rejoice in and respect the natural world. We know the adjustments that we can make to our daily lives that can make a huge difference to the planet. We can eat lower on the food chain – that is not difficult to do here in Belfast, and we support local farmers at the same time. We can buy less stuff. Use renewable energy. Advocate for policies that reduce our footprint and are grounded in the knowledge that God desires that all humans and all creation thrive.

Just when we might be tempted to be awed by our own particular brilliance, something comes along to humble us, if we allow ourselves to listen to what the earth has to tell us. When the tsunami hit Indonesia a few years ago, there was talk afterwards about how we needed new technology to give us a better early tsunami warning system. But do you remember that the Island tribal peoples and the animals sensed that the tsunami was coming, and headed for higher ground, removing themselves from danger? Knowing this, we might open ourselves to the possibility that survival -- our salvation -- lies not in our technological know-how, or better machines, but in the acquiring of some humility, reconnecting ourselves to the pulse, the hum, and the wisdom of the universe that is right there in front of us, if we can relearn to hear it.

It may be a helpful “thought experiment” us to reflect on how we see ourselves in creation. Do we feel as though we have pride of place, and the rest of the world is here for our benefit? Is this a scary thought, that humans don't perhaps occupy some special place but are there with all creation? Or might it be a profound relief? Might this be

exactly one of the central ways in which we experience grace? Because, if you believe that humans have a special, higher place in the hierarchy that reaches to heaven, then it would follow that within humanity there is a further hierarchy of being. Which means that someone is below you and someone is above you. I wonder how many of us carry the burden of this sense that we have to continually prove ourselves to God, that the next guy is surely more deserving, more holy, more worthy than we are. Or, “I’m no great shakes, but at least I’m better than that guy!” How exhausting! How profoundly lonely. Can we take in that if God loves every inch of every thing that crawls on the ground, God loves every one of us too, not just when we behave well, but for the very is-ness of us? Just because we are?

Because if there is the second big lesson in Job, it is God’s profound joy, God’s exuberant delight in creation.

“Do you hunt game for the lioness
And feed her ravenous cubs,
When they crouch in their den, impatient,
Or lie in ambush in the thicket?
Who finds her prey at nightfall
When her cubs are aching with hunger?”

“Do you teach the vulture to soar
And build his nest in the clouds?
He makes his home on the mountaintop,
On the unapproachable crag.
He sits and scans for prey;
From far off his eyes can spot it;
His little ones drink its blood.
Where the unburied are, he is.

This is not Walt Disney; there is nothing sentimental about this vision of the world. It is rich, tough, grisly, wild, untamed glory. This is a God who is passionately in love with the world. This is a world that is blessed. Every inch of it. That includes the vulture, the behemoth, and Job. And you. And me.

Let’s say one more thing about the Book of Job. The first 29 chapters, the ones where Job and his friends are arguing, are framed in answers of absolute certainty, and under the illusion that the world was ordered by rewards for the righteous and punishment for the wicked. This is a persistent religious understanding too. But the passages that contain the wisdom of this Book, narrated in the voice of God, are almost entirely framed, not in answers, but questions! The voice of God challenges Job’s thinking with question after question after question. It reminds us of the power of the question, the question that opens us up, calls us to resist easy answers, and breaks through our established thinking. It reminds us of the need to be able to rest in ambiguity and mystery. We don’t – and never will – have all the answers. In the words of Evelyn Underhill, “if God were small enough to be understood, [God] would not be big enough to be worshiped.”

The book of Job invites us to ponder – what if God loves questions more than answers? Perhaps it is in our questions that is the beginning of humility, and the beginning of wisdom. It’s the question of the scientist, and the question of the person of faith. Who are we? What is our place in creation? And how does God want us to live, on this glorious, heartbreakingly beautiful Earth?

Amen.

ⁱ William P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science and the Ecology of Wonder* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 115.

ⁱⁱ Bill McKibben, *The Comforting Whirlwind: God, Job, and the Scale of Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994),