

Sunday June 5th, 2022

Pentecost

Job 40:15-41:11

“Be Afraid; Very Afraid”

One genre of films and books, and even television, that I just simply do not understand, or enjoy at all, is horror stories. I know they are very popular stories, just ask Stephen King every time he goes to the bank. So, it is surprising that one of the first dates I ever went on with Laura, was to a film called “Creep Show” which actually was Stephen King’s first screen play. Honestly, I don’t know what I was thinking, other than I just wanted to be with Laura, and frankly the screen could have stayed blank and I’d been happy.

It is a very campy kind of movie, and most of the time pretty silly, but one scene caught me by absolute surprise. So much so, that I literally jumped from my seat and landed on Laura. So, why do people like these things? Well in Psychology today there was reported on October 29th 2015, on their website, a study on this very question

“Haidt, McCauley, and Rozin (1994), in conducting research on feelings of disgust, exposed college students to three documentary videos depicting real-life horrors. One clip showed cows being stunned, killed, and butchered in a slaughterhouse; a second clip pictured a live monkey being struck in the head with a hammer, having its skull cracked open, and its brain served as dessert; a third clip depicted a child’s facial skin being turned inside out in preparation for surgery.

Ninety percent of the students turned the video off before it reached the end. Even the majority of individuals who watched the tape in its entirety, found the images disturbing. Yet many of these same individuals would think nothing of paying money to attend the premiere of a new horror film, with much more blood and gore than was present in the documentaries that most of them found repugnant. McCauley (1998) posed the logical question of why these students found the documentary film so unpleasant, when most had sat through horror pictures that were appreciably more violent and bloody.

The answer that McCauley came up with, was that the fictional nature of horror films affords viewers a sense of control by placing psychological distance between them and the violent acts they have witnessed. Most people who view horror movies, understand that the filmed events are unreal, which furnishes them with psychological distance from the horror portrayed in the film. In fact, there is evidence that young viewers who perceive greater realism in horror films are more negatively affected by their exposure to horror films, than viewers who perceive the film as unreal (Hoekstra, Harris, & Helmick, 1999)."

So, it seems it’s okay to be afraid of horrible things, if the fear is caused by something that is not real. Real evil terrifies me. I have experienced it in my thoughts, and in my life, and I have observed it in the world. Horrible things pop up in relationships, devastating illnesses, criminal activity, and so many things that make us lie awake at night listening for things that go bump. How are we to deal not with the fictional portrayals of evil, but with the real stuff?

Sunday June 5th, 2022

Pentecost

How do we cope when evil pops up and devastates our world? It's really the fact that evil exists in the world, that has really thrown, Job's life into turmoil.

Before we unpack God's response to the presence of evil, God begins his address with a challenge to Job. "Job, if you don't like the way I do things; then you give it a go". Put on the robes, and wigs of a judge, and you manage things. Let your anger on the evil in the world pour forth. Avenge the wronged. Can you do what I do Job? Are you able? I cannot help but recollect a silly little movie where God actually hands his control over to someone. Jim Carrey played the lead in Bruce Almighty.

Like Job, he is angry at the way things are going in his life and in the world, so God (played by Morgan Freeman) lets him have a go, and what a mess he makes of it all. I remember in one scene he is tired of all the people praying to win the lottery, so he allows everyone to win, meaning they all get about a dollar in prize money, angering everyone further. To impress his girlfriend, he moves the moon closer to earth, which is lovely, until it causes devastating tides.

It's arrogance to believe we know how to manage things better than God. Remember James and John desiring the places of honour in Jesus' kingdom. It was a reckless request. "Can you drink the same cup as me"? "Oh, Sure Jesus! We can do that." But they knew not what they had committed to. Now to the main point of the speech. God turns back to the discussion about the "Behemoth".

A creature created by God, that is kind of a "super beast". It is very powerful. It has an insatiable appetite. It is very virile. It has bones of bronze and iron. Job is called to think of what this creature looks like. It is, God says, the first creature he made and only God is powerful enough to control this beast, even approaching it with a sword, to eventually kill it if need be. In Revelation 19:15ff there is another reference to a sword destroying the beast and his prophet.

Sometimes the beast is hiding, but it is always there, waiting to devour the unaware. Then God brings in another beast called the Leviathan. For 34 verses God describes in detail the nature of this beast without explaining why he is describing it. Job is meant to just listen and let the image of this fearsome creature develop in his mind. So, God ask's Job if he is able to sit at the ocean's edge and cask his fishing line out and reel in this monster, which will end up eating Job.

Can you tie this beast up? Get it to plead for mercy. The word "binding" here, harkens back to the idea of covenant. Come on Job, it's a crazy idea. You can no more do that than tame a wild ox, and make it your pet. The irony is just dripping here. "Imagine bringing home the leviathan as a pet, only to have the creature give a mighty roar and devour your family. No one can kill this beast. No one, can tame the leviathan, except God himself.

Imagine stirring up the sea and drawing the beast out for battle. This is very reminiscent of the scene in Lord of the Rings where the foolish hobbit tosses stones into a lake and disturbs the water drawing the balrog. God continues, "If you cannot manage this Job, then imagine how powerful I am in being able to control this beast." And imagine what this means for the leviathan.

Sunday June 5th, 2022

Pentecost

God goes on to describe in greater detail the awesome terror this beast is. You can attack it with any manner of human weapons to no effect. This is a great sea monster; a dragon if you will. And on this earth, there is no other like him. It fears no one, and nothing on this earth. It is the proudest thing on earth. It can truly say, "I am the greatest".

So, what are we, or Job to make of the descriptions of the Behemoth and Leviathan? But first we must see that Job gets the point. He acknowledges that God is fully in control, and that God's purposes cannot be thwarted. Job acknowledges his arrogance in speaking about things he did not know. Therefore, Job is put in his place. He is ready to surrender fully to God and God's plan for him; whatever that may be.

Job says that he has heard God by the hearing of his ear, but now he sees God with his eyes. The point here is very important for all of us. All through the book, Job has listened to arguments from his friends. These have been serious theological and philosophical debates. Job had heard there is one God, and that God is righteous and powerful. But now, because of the image of these two beasts he has seen or imagined, he finally understands.

Even though he is still on the rubbish heap scrapping his sores, Job has encountered God at a depth he has never reached before. This leads him to repent. Something he refused to do all through the book. But repent not for the supposed things his friends suggested, but rather for the way he thought and spoke about God. It is quite a moment. A moment of incredible clarity and an unburdening of a very troubled soul.

Yet, there is still the matter of what exactly did the behemoth and Leviathan mentioned here mean? Scholars have taken two tracks on the matter. Some see these as actual creatures, like one we may see in a zoo. One idea is that the behemoth was a hippo, and the leviathan was a crocodile. The other idea is to think of them as two creatures that occur in the stories of gods and goddesses in the near east.

You can understand how someone would think these might be hippos or crocodiles. Leviathan has teeth that seem like a crocodile. This approach, however, is problematic. The comparison between what God describes, and actual animals does not line up. Also, the capturing and control of a hippo or crocodile is not beyond Job's abilities. The better approach is seeing these creatures as prominent characters in ancient stories.

The bible has other examples of the Leviathan used this way. Like in Isaiah 27:1 and Psalm 74 and 104. Then there is Revelation, and the many depictions of beasts and serpents and dragons that applies directly to Satan. Rev. 20:2 reads, "And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan and bound him." This then leads to the conclusion that the behemoth and Leviathan represent evil.

Both the bible and other ancient texts use beasts like this to represent evil. In many ancient myths and fairy tales, mystical creatures were meant as warnings to watch out for evil. To not get lured in. Hansel and Gretel anyone? In ancient cultures, these beasts were depicted in fights of gods or heroes, like Hercules. It is more than likely that the Israelites who heard this passage read, would make the association to other religious stories.

Sunday June 5th, 2022

Pentecost

But we must be careful in not dismissing these beasts as just mythical fantasies. They may be a poetic device, but they were used to convey very real circumstances. The supernatural terror that we encounter is very real, and is stronger than we are; however, God is stronger still.

It is very reasonable to think of the Leviathan as representing the Satan at the beginning of the book. Behemoth is trickier to understand, but it seems reasonable to think of the Behemoth as representing death. This is so, because the behemoth is depicted as always hungrily devouring people. Here again is a connection to the Satan, because in scripture, the Satan is often linked with death.

God has challenged Job to take over reigning in these beasts, but that would be futile. The behemoth and leviathan are using ancient well-known imagery and stories to make the point that God and God alone can leash in evil. In John 12:31 the inference is that the leviathan is the ruler of the world, or as Jesus says, “the prince of the power of the air.” The reference to air here means the space between heaven and earth; the supernatural realm.

It’s this monster that has been tormenting Job. God is telling Job he is in no way strong enough or wise enough to take on the problem of evil. Our only hope is for God to reign the evil in. To put a leash on it. I remember several years back when I was a kid, my mother decided she wanted a new cocker spaniel puppy. The breeder’s location was on our way home from my grandparents, so we stopped to get the dog.

It was a farm, and no one seemed at the house, so my father decided to check out the barn to see if anyone was there. In no time flat, Dad came racing back to the car yelling for us to get inside the vehicle. Across the field my dad raced with a huge St. Bernard hot on his heels, barking, and then slobbering all over the car trying to get at us. Why wasn’t this beast leashed? Where was its master to call it off?

The leviathan is relentless and has persisted in attacking Job. Job questions therefore, whether God is able to rein him in. But remember that the Satan can only do as God permits, according to the beginning of the story. Now I know this is not a full answer to our questions about evil. It is not a tidy little way to answer the problem of suffering. But it goes much deeper than this, by revealing a bit about who God is. The mystery of evil is God’s mystery.

Therefore, when we are suffering, or sit with others who suffer, we can with confidence turn to God, knowing that as bad as it is, God is still got a hold of it. It will not go on forever. It isn’t until the New Testament that we see what it cost God to win victory over the Leviathan. Evil cannot be defeated by evil. An “eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”, solves nothing. Evil is defeated by redemptive suffering; by God himself.

Hebrews 2:14 reads, “that through death he might destroy the one who has power of death, that is, the devil”. The sting of death is sin and we experience the full brunt of evil because we surrender to its influence instead of surrendering to the one who binds it and leashes it.

Sunday June 5th, 2022

Pentecost

The Apostle Paul wrote,

“And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him”. (Col. 2:13-15)

The one who reigns in the leviathan, is the one who suffered on the cross. He is the Lord who deals in scars, and when the darkness of the leviathan looms.

Evil frightens me more than any horror film can. And it is supposed to frighten me, so that I know-deeply know- that it is too strong for me, and that I cannot resist its power on my own. This is not to leave me living life in great foreboding terror, but to live life in the assurance that the one who restrains the behemoth and leviathan is my Saviour. The assurance that God in Christ can do all things, and no purpose of his can be thwarted is the only assurance and comfort I need when facing the terrifying nature of evil.