

Sunday March 20th, 2022

Lent III

Job 25:1-6; 26:1-14

“Wisdom Before Religion”

A policeman was interrogating 3 guys who were training to become detectives. To test their skills in recognizing a suspect, he shows the first guys a picture for 5 seconds and then hides it. "This is your suspect; how would you recognize him?" The first guy answers, "That's easy, we'll catch him fast because he only has one eye!" The policeman says, "Well...uh...that's because the picture I showed is his side profile."

Slightly flustered by this ridiculous response, he flashes the picture for 5 seconds at the second guy and asks him, "This is your suspect, how would you recognize him?" The second guy smiles, flips his hair and says, "Ha! He'd be too easy to catch because he only has one ear!" The policeman angrily responds, "What's the matter with you two?!? Of course, only one eye and one ear are showing, because it's a picture of his side profile! Is that the best answer you can come up with?"

Extremely frustrated at this point, he shows the picture to the third guy and in a very testy voice asks, "This is your suspect, how would you recognize him? He quickly adds, "Think hard before giving me a stupid answer." The third guy looks at the picture intently for a moment and says, "The suspect wears contact lenses." The policeman is surprised and speechless because he really doesn't know himself if the suspect wears contacts or not.

"Well, that's an interesting answer. Wait here for a few minutes while I check his file and I'll get back to you on that." He leaves the room and goes to his office, checks the suspect's file on his computer and comes back with a beaming smile on his face. "Wow! I can't believe it. It's TRUE! The suspect does, in fact, wear contact lenses. Good work! How were you able to make such an astute observation?" "That's easy..." the third guy replied. "He can't wear regular glasses because he only has one eye and one ear."

Have you ever had one of those moments that you've been listening to someone go on about something you know they have no business talking about, only to just pray they will stop? We have a word in English for people blowing smoke or tossing around words as if they are the world's experts. It called pontificating. Even though it seems to be its own epidemic in our culture right now, it has been around ever since people could string word together.

As we come to the end of Job's three friends' speeches, it is clear that Job has had enough. Bildad's third speech is short and Zophar does not give a third, so we might assume that this points to the absolute bankruptcy of their efforts to comfort Job. Bildad begins as Eliphaz has done twice before to by declaring God's sovereignty and God's purity. The word fear here denotes, reverence. A reverence given because of God's holiness.

Bildad speaks of the endless armies at his beck and call. This is a direct reflection of the description of God used often in the Old Testament; "Lord of Hosts". God is everywhere, controlling everything. Therefore, we ought to bow in reverence rather than seeking to be justified as Job seems to be doing. Once again Bildad speaks for the three friends in saying again that Job's desire and hope to stand before God face-to-face is absurd and arrogant.

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Job has come close to this very thought in 9:2. “How can a man who is born of woman be pure”? Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean thing? However, unlike his friends, he clings to the hope of a mediator who will stand for him before Almighty God. God does not even see the moon and stars as pure, so how can he see the purity of a person who is but a maggot or worm? Bildad is again, refusing to admit grace into his religion, or his world view.

Thus, we hear the end of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. Thank goodness; Job probably thought. One thing is clear from their speeches though is that they are consistent. Their theological system remains intact no matter what Job says. In their hearts and minds their system describes Job’s situation to a “T”. Job however is not as consistent. His understanding of the world, which was the same as his friends, has been shaken to the core.

His speeches drip with pain and frustration at a God he cannot understand. But over time, as he works through his experience, he begins to see the hope of a mediator to come to his rescue. Some scholars really struggle with chapters 24-27 because we find Job saying things that we do not expect him to say. Therefore, some scholars believe this section is out of place but this is not true at all. Job’s changing mind and heart are an expression of his growth and faith.

Job has now realized that the “so-called” wisdom his friends have offered up is worthless. The theology and faith of his friends is not wisdom at all. Job rightly assumed the position of the teacher, in stressing that true wisdom is found only in God’s absolute sovereignty, and God’s wisdom is far greater than our own. Job’s tone and expressions are clearly meant for us to see him as sarcastic.

Earlier he sarcastically lamented that when his friends died there would be no more wisdom in the world (12:2). His attitude towards his friends is basically him saying, “I am so grateful that I, who am powerless and weak, have found such lifesaving help and salvation from your lips [v.2] that I, who have no wisdom, and never say anything right, have been privileged to listen to your plentiful, health giving {‘sound’} knowledge. What a lucky man I am!

However, where did you get such wisdom? Someone must have helped you. It sounds so much like some of the pabulum spread on Facebook, that passes itself off as wisdom and life enhancing. More and more, people are gleaning information from the internet and simply assuming it is true. Job’s friends have heard this approach to faith and life from others, and assume it is correct. They have never questioned it, and get indignant when anyone does.

The key thing to remember here is that Job correctly links wisdom with a Savior. True wisdom of God will actually help and rescue the suffering and needy. The proof that the three friends do not have wisdom is that they cannot save anyone, not even themselves.

Job launches into a beautiful hymn of praise to God the Creator. There is however, a little added ending that changes everything about the religious system his friends espouse. Job starts with the very lowest level of reality; Sheol and Abaddon, the place of the dead. This place where the dead go, and are watched over by supernatural beings. The point here is that dead people do not escape the sovereignty of God. You cannot hide in Sheol.

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However, I need to point out that in Job's thinking, there is no second god, or evil entity ruling this place; like a devil, because God rules everywhere. Next, Job paints us a picture of moving from the sea bottom to the land on which we all stand. God maintains the created order from how the weather works to light and dark. The reference in verse 7 to the "north" is probably a reference to Mount Zaphon.

Zaphon was considered a holy mountain by ancient people, where gods and goddesses dwelt. Something like Mount Olympus, later in Greek mythology. In Isaiah 14:13, Isaiah the prophet speaks of the pride of the King of Babylon when he writes, "You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven, above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north [Zaphon]'"

In Psalm 48:2 Mount Zion is referred to as being in the far north [Zaphon]. It is not about geography, but about theology in describing the sovereignty of God. All through the Old Testament references are made to the high places, where people, built altars. Often as a sign of the purification of God's people, reference is made to destroying the high places. Taking away the seat of idolatry.

Job uses language that resembles closely the creation story in Genesis, where the waters are parted to create the dry land. Poetically it is lovely. The idea of water being held up in clouds, only allowing some of the water to fall. Splitting clouds in verse, means for us a "cloud burst".

God made the moon which shines like a face on the waters. As beautiful as creation is though, God can create and destroy it whenever he wants. The very pillars of the earth are shaken as God speaks. Yes, there is order in creation, but the ultimate reality is God himself. And God will use this shaking (v.11) as a sign of God's rebuking of evil in the world. Job's point is that the system that is operating in the world is not what his friends promote, it is God himself.

Evil is depicted in verse 13 as a serpent. Rahab means "fleeing serpent". It is a poetic representation of all that is evil. In Isaiah 27:1 the same beast is called Leviathan. The Hebrew word here for "fleeing Serpent" is Rahab. This serpent represents everything that is anti-God. The word "fleeing" indicates a serpent that glides and twists through the air. This image of a serpent will return in chapter 41.

God sovereignty does not just mean the upholding of the moral order of the universe as the three comforters believe. Job has discerned that evil and suffering will require God to shake the very foundations of the world. This shaking of the foundations can also speak about Job's own suffering as he has been shaken to his foundation. In other words, not all earthquakes in our lives are recorded by a seismograph.

For us there is a here a prophetic view of Jesus who when he dies the very earth shook. The curtain in the temple tore in two. Job is trying to communicate to his friends that there is wisdom in God that is far beyond any of us, and creation proves this. Job's depiction of creation shows us that the system his friends preached has no saving merit. Only the wisdom of God will defeat the Leviathan.

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The Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 1: 18-21 picks up this theme hundreds of years after Job. Paul writes, “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?”

Paul could have been writing directly to Job’s friends. The tightly ordered religious system the three friends were defending and promoting cannot now or then, save anyone. Our own feeble wisdom cannot match up against the “leviathan”. Bildad is the one blowing smoke here. He thinks himself wise enough to know the heart of God and God’s plan for the world and Job. Job whether he realizes it or not have captured a significant piece of the puzzle in coming to terms with his suffering.

So, the speeches of his three friends mercifully comes to an end. Job has listened and endured what should have been comfort but ended up being painful. Next, we encounter Job’s full summary and response to the things his friends have said. Job takes on the style of speaking much like that of a biblical prophet. “And Job again took up his discourse, and said...” Balaam uses this same formula when he speaks to Israel in Numbers, in his four addresses.

We are drawing the curtain on the feeble efforts of Job’s friends, and now the table is set to prepare us to meet a new friend Elihu and finally we hear from God. This lengthy journey through the speeches of the three friends encapsulates a great deal of what people even today believe about how the world works, and why bad things happen to people. Or why bad things happen to us when we think we do everything right.

Nothing is solved yet in Job’s mind and heart nor in ours either. All we have discerned is what doesn’t explain our hurt and suffering. But sometimes you have to clear out the old stuff to make way for the new stuff. Sometimes you have to tear down the ideas we have built our lives on to rebuild new ideas. The real issue for all of us is are we willing to let this happen, because like Job’s friends it is hard to undertake this renovation of our minds and hearts.

Like Job’s friends there are people who dig in their heels and refuse to stretch, grow or consider alternatives. Tony Campolo tells a story a pastor friend of his shared with him. *It seems there was a homeless man who went by the name of “Tiger”. He was homeless by his own choice because he refused to avail himself of any of the housing options that we offered to him by the church or by the government.*

At night, Tiger would come and sleep under the portico in front of the church that my friends pastored. From time to time, he would come into the pastor’s office to sit and chat with the pastor, relating his life’s experiences and trying to share his philosophy of life. Tiger was often depressed and, on several occasions, had come close to committing suicide, but each time he gave up the idea because, as he said, “The Lord told me not to do it!”

One day, Tiger came to the pastor’s office and declared that the night before he had been so depressed he had almost jumped off the bridge and cast himself into the river that ran through the middle of the city.

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“That’s the place where I go when I am thinking about killing myself,” he explained. “But just like the other times, at the last-minute God said, “Don’t do it. And I didn’t.” My pastor friend said, “God told you not to do it because God loves you. That’s why God told you what he did.”

“Preacher!” shouted Tiger. “If God wants to keep me from jumping off that bridge, why doesn’t he change the things that make me want to jump? That’s what I want to know. Why doesn’t God change the things that make me want to jump?” Most of us when we are driven to the depths of despair, ask like Tiger, who God doesn’t deliver us from those things that push us to the edge. Why doesn’t God intercede and make things different?

Many years ago, the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk, asked the same questions. Then somehow, through prayer, Habakkuk discovered a source that lifted his heart in spite of the existential circumstance of his life. He prayed:

Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be on the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and fields shall yield not meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet will I rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. (Hab. 3:17-18) - (Stories to Feed Your Soul p. 150)

This is the truth that Job is starting to see, and hopefully we can see it too.