

Sunday May 29th, 2022
Anniversary Sunday

Job 38:1-18
“God Speaks, We Better Listen”

A new general was allotted to a new army base. After some time in the base, he realized how there were two army men guarding an empty bench in shifts. He asked his colleagues, and his juniors, what it was all about. A colleague said “I don’t know, but it’s been a tradition here since I joined 35 years ago.” The general was confused as he went through the past generals of that base until, he found the one that was in charge 35 years ago. He attempted to find him, and found that he had long retired, and he lived in the countryside now. He contacted him and requested to meet. On the day of the meeting the general asked the retired commander why that bench was guarded so much. The commander was shocked. “So, you’re telling me the paint on that bench hasn’t dried yet?!” <https://www.ba-bamail.com/jokes/army-jokes/?jokeid=1376>

Deciding why something is the way it is, can be challenging. And even when we discover the reasons, we are less than satisfied with the logic behind it. Over the history of human kind, there are countless persons who have believed that had they been in charge, the universe would look a lot better, and run more smoothly. Maybe if God had just consulted us a bit, before making some decisions like, “Why do we have mosquitos or raisins?”

Job is no exception to this thinking, as he wondered that if he were in charge of things, he would not have suffered as he did. Elihu had strived to bring some truth to the misguidedness of Job, and the other three friends. His words were powerful, blessed by God, and they cut to the core of these other men. So much so, that when he finishes speaking, the others have nothing to say. Is the matter closed, well not yet?

Something earth shattering falls upon this little band sitting on the rubbish heap. In what Job has both long for, and deeply feared, God speaks directly and personally to Job himself. Job acknowledged way back in chapter 9, that he believed if God spoke directly to him, it would be mean his death. None of these men expected God to speak so clearly, and so terrifyingly, out of the whirlwind. We are meant to see in what follows, that the tables are turned on Job.

Instead of being the questioner, he is the one being questioned. There is a story about Benjamin Jowett, when he was the Master of Balliol college in Oxford. At a dinner party someone asked him, “Dr. Jowett, we would like to know what your opinion of God is”. To which he replied, “I should think it is a great impertinence were I to express my opinion about God. The only constant anxiety of my life is to know what is God’s opinion of me.”

Unlike speaking through a prophet like Elihu, God takes center stage, and we would be wise to listen intently. And lest we wonder if there is any connection to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the name for God used here is Yahweh. The name used centuries after Job, to denote a covenant relationship with Israel. Therefore, Job was a believer in the same God as Israel, even though he was not an Israelite.

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It is also important to note that God is speaking directly to one person, and that when God speaks like this it is very frightening. God speaks out of a storm, which is humbling and terrifying. But why does God speak so directly, so personally.

God actually delivers two speeches, and both times the speeches begin with a challenge. In the first address we are looking at today, Job is accused by God of “darkening counsel by words without knowledge”. God does not bring up any supposed secret sins Job committed, but God agrees with Elihu, that Job has spoken without any true insight. What Job has said, has induced this encounter with God.

Job has spoken as if he has some cosmic wisdom about how the universe works. As if Job, or any of us, could really understand all the intricacies of creation. So, God says to Job, “Dress for action”, gird up his loins, meaning pull his robe into his belt for vigorous activity. In today’s idioms we might say that God is telling him to “man up”. Job will need all his mental faculties to receive and understand what God is going to say.

Job has wanted to question God, but God says he will question Job. God never answers Job’s questions, nor ours. But what God does say, will answer Job’s heart in a much deeper way. So, what does God say. I know I am all ears. God begins by talking about the presence of evil in the good created order, he has fashioned. This is some of the most important points for us to garner from Job.

God begins by describing the building of the universe, like a great building project. God measured out every aspect of his creation. God firmed up the foundations and plumbed the lines. It is something built to last. It has beauty and is majestic. These images appear later in the Psalms and the prophets. Everything functions as it was designed to. There is a moral, social, relational order with justice at its heart.

Job has been so degraded by his suffering, that he can no longer see the goodness of creation. This has led Job to attribute evil to the purposes of God. When the world was made, the very stars sang praises, and that is what Job has lost in all his misery. God is calling Job to realign himself, even as he suffers, to this song of praise resounding in creation. Nowhere does God say, that evil intruded on his creation. What God deemed good is still good.

But what about evil. Well God’s answer to this burning question in the minds of all humanity, is that there is a place for evil in the world, but it is strictly limited, and in no way diminishes the good of creation. The image painted here is that of a sea bursting forth like the birth of an unruly child. A baby that needs to be restrained with swaddling bands, or as we might do, place the baby in a playpen.

The stormy seas, representing evil in this analogy, have limits. They meet the shore or cliffs and can go no further. Anyone who has walked along a rugged coastline has marveled at the power of the sea, and been intrigued by the way a cliff withstands the onslaught. When evil is pitted against God’s power and control, it is no contest. Even for Job, there are limits to how far this evil can go in his life. Therefore, even disorder in our lives has a place in God’s order.

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But will it always be so. Will there always be evil, even though it is restrained? The image changes to that of an architect, surveyor, or builder. God is portrayed as a commander. Even the morning is described as awaiting its orders. Job, have you ever told the sun to rise? The sun, means light which shines on the wicked, because they like to work in the dark. Every time the sun comes up, it is a reminder that there is judgment to come. Every morning reminds us that wickedness and suffering will not last forever. The morning will come. The ugliness of evil or suffering has a part to play in God's creative order, and it too shall ultimately serve the glory of God. How do we know that there is not some independent and autonomous power of evil threatening the good purposes of God?

Well, it is revealing how fascinated people are with extremes. There is a whole genre of sports called extreme sports, some of which are now part of the Olympics. Most of us are content to watch people do risky things from the comfort of our armchairs, but still, we love pushing the envelope. Why do we do these crazy things? Why do we take risks, or spend millions to see how far we can go?

Perhaps it's because in going to extremes, we believe we can get a better idea of how things work, and think we can control things. Even, God says, the place of the dead. Job, have you been to the bottom of the sea or the place of the dead? Can you reveal its mysteries? Job doesn't know these things, and we do not either. But God knows. There is not one place or one corner where we or anything else can hide.

Darkness terrifies us, but for God it is no cause for alarm. Look at the skies Job. Are you privy to the wonders of the storehouse of precipitation that I made to sustain life on the earth? Or how about hail or snow, that comes upon time of war. Hitler discovered that when his armies invaded Russia in the winter. How about the stars. Did you put them in their courses Job? This is all God's doing. We have no part in it, nor have we grounds to complain about it.

God then describes the creatures of his world in the form of beautiful poetry. But not just any creatures; rather wild creatures. We are not talking about farm animals or pets here. These are animals not under any person's control. The main point here is that there is a created order outside of our control. This leads to beginning to answer the hard question of what do we do when the wild world barges into our lives.

There is also another motif introduced here and that is the one of life and death. All the animals described here as being wild, are all born and then all die. In particular God mentions the fragility of young ones. We cannot begin to understand life without consideration of both birth and death. The "circle of life" to borrow from The Lion King, is on full display here. These wild animals, particularly predators, are able to look after themselves without any input from us.

We have all seen video of lions or other predators lying in wait, then pouncing or chasing down a meal. It is a violent scene, but afterwards the kill feeds the lion's cubs and then others like scavengers. As you watch a scene like that; how does it make you feel? We may not like it, but that is the way the created world works. The next generation of animals depends on the death of another. God even says that this killed animal, is actually an answer to the prayer of the predator and scavenger, for something to eat.

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I had a friend in Toronto, whose daughter worked at the Toronto Zoo. One day as he went to pick up his daughter, he took a moment to observe some animals, particularly the tiger. As he was watching, a Canada goose landed in the enclosure, and immediately the tiger was upon it to kill it. Another man watching this said, “someone should stop this, and go in there and save the goose”. To which my friend said, “After you”. We cannot alter these things, nor should we. As naturalists tell us, it is a finely tuned mechanism that God has made.

God next questions Job about the importance of timing and existence. A mountain goat, gives birth to her baby, on her time and location. Can Job predict the number of months that calf will live? This new calf will grow and develop all without anything from Job or any of us. We can be observers, but we cannot alter this in any way. God may be the one who brings trouble, but he also brings the time of birth and life.

As we looked at in Ecclesiastes, “There is a time for everything”. Job had criticized God for not ordering things correctly. It is an empty criticism, being that God knows exactly when the mountain goat will be born and how long it shall live. “His eye is on the sparrow”, we sing, so why fret that we are out of our creator’s care. The care and ordering of wild creatures, is the same care and ordering God extends to human beings.

There is also a wild freedom in God’s creation. God has let the wild donkey go free, to wander and search for food. Yet the donkey’s freedom to search and wander in no way compromises God’s absolute control over all of life. Rather this wandering of wild things, just reveals how much of the universe is outside of our control and understanding. There is also power and danger from the wild.

He tells Job to go and tame a wild ox. These wild oxen, were renowned for their power and strength. Some were reported to be six feet across at the shoulders. In Psalm 22 David speaks of being delivered from the horns of a wild ox. So, Job, why not go out to the hills, find a wild ox and pat it on the end and bring it home. Let it eat right out of you hand, put a bridle on it to control it. Job would say, “are you kidding”?

You know Job, that there is wild stuff out there, which you cannot hope to tame. Only God can tame the wild things and places. There is also foolishness wondering in the wild. The only creature portrayed negatively is an ostrich. God points out that it has wings but cannot fly. The ostrich doesn’t seem to worry about its eggs getting stepped on. The ostrich is not very bright, but that is the way God made it. The ostrich is stupid but try and catch on, even on horseback and you cannot. There are such paradoxes in nature and that is how God made it.

Take a war horse for example Job. Well, we need to recapture the meaning of a war horse. Horses today are domesticated and tame, but in Job’s Day, war horses were a different kettle of fish. Bread and trained for war. Powerful and unafraid, not slowing down even as arrows and javelins hit their sides. The whole reason for being for a war horse is to exist to hurt, maim, and kill, with great ferocity. But yet, this warhorse has a master. The one who trained it and directs its course. The wildness of nature also has a master, and we need to trust that master.

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Then God returns to the picture of a predator, namely an eagle, flying overhead, majestically. It is an awesome thing to see, but why is it flying? To find prey. To find, with its keen vision a mouse or other small animal to bring to its chicks for them to devour.

We may cringe at this reality, but the point here is that God is not permitting predators to hunt and kill. God has ordained them, ordered them to do so. This universe is full of life and death. In God's creation you cannot have one without the other. We need be careful we do not sanitize the wildness of this universe. All of us have seen calendars with beautiful, cute pictures adorning the monthly chart. No one ever gets one that shows a lion eating a zebra.

Just because we try to ignore this aspect of creation, doesn't mean it is still not there, and God ordained it to be so. This leads to the inescapable conclusion that if the universe is so wild, and beyond our comprehension, we dare not use simple answers to the questions about the nature of evil. We have not the understanding, or the ability to delve the depths of God's wisdom on these matters.

In conclusion. Job is declared a faultfinder by God. Job argues with God and criticizes the way God runs the world. Job's sin is in all this, is arrogance. Of thinking he is any position to debate God on any of these matters. God is saying that he has not made a mistake with the world and especially with Job. God's counsel is perfect.

Job's only response is become silent. To declare he will go no further with his words. God has listened to the arguments of Job for several chapters, and now God wants Job to be quiet. This is a vital lesson for us in that sometimes, for our own good, God speaks to us, if only to silence us and put us in our place. Job is realizing that he has overstepped his place, and he needs to trust God in all things. This should be our response as well. To recognize our place and trust implicitly the one who made all things.