

Vindication and Restoration
Wisdom's Word on Suffering: Sermons from Job, Part 4

Job 42:1-17

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
 Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on October 25, 2015]

I

"We must not question God."

How many times have I heard someone say that to me over 35 years of ministry?

If I had a dollar for every time I've heard someone say,

"We must not question God"—

I might have been able to retire some time ago.

When people have said that to me,

my response has usually been,

"Have you never read the Book of Job?"

II

Last week we left Job as he overhears God's angry response to his four so-called friends.

After asking Job, who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?,

God proceeds to give Job's friends a divine tongue lashing for having misrepresented God in their counsel to Job.

God produces a withering argument that is based upon God's sovereignty over nature—

over wind and sea and storm

To claim a personal relationship with a God who displays such power should leave us speechless,

or, if we must speak,

we can only stammer, "**Glory!**"

Or, as one pastor told it, his grandmother used to say, **“Glory, shut my mouth!”**

This is precisely what Job says... *“Glory, shut my mouth!”*

Job stands in the glory of God’s presence with his hand over his gaping mouth as his eyes fill with wonder.

He gazes on what the rest of scripture tells us one cannot look upon without being struck dead.

But Job is not struck dead.

God has now come and is ready to respond to Job’s argument.

Here then is the first lesson from the final chapter of this magnificent treatise on human suffering:

God hears our complaint,
and even more, God responds.

This is why all but one or two of the Psalms of lament end with words of praise and thanksgiving.

God has heard,
God has acted,
God has answered the lamenter’s prayer.

Slowly drawing his hand away from his mouth, Job says,

*“I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.”*

Then Job quotes God’s words back to him:

“Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?”

To which Job responds:

*“Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me,
which I did not know.”*

Behind this lies Job's newly discovered awareness of who God is.

God is not a human magnified by the power of ten.

God is God—infinately beyond anything we can comprehend or imagine.

God is creator, but God is more—

God is Job's redeemer and is standing by him,
as he insisted God would,
in his argument with his friends.

III

But Job has learned something else:

in the mystery of who God is and the wonder of God's creation,
nature's chaos has a roll to play.

Shifting tectonic plates cause earthquakes and tsunamis;

low pressure zones bring the destruction of hurricanes;

lightening causes forest fires that destroy wildlife, property,
and sometimes even human lives.

But we have also learned that such phenomena have a role to play in the tapestry of creation in ways we don't always comprehend at the time.

Some of you may recall the massive 1988 forest fires that burned just over 1/3 of Yellowstone National Park,

threatened two visitors' centers,

including the historic Old Faithful Inn,

and for the first time in the history of Yellowstone,
closed the park to all visitors.

When Libby and I visited Yellowstone two years ago July, we saw hundreds of thousands of young lodge pole pine trees, now maturing, that sprouted and grew from the seeds that were released in that fire

The regeneration of plant life at Yellowstone has been so complete that no replanting has ever been attempted.

Science helps us understand how such things come about.

The Book of Job helps us understand that the chaos of nature has purposes that we cannot fathom,
and that the chaos must not be taken personally.

When hurricanes or tornados strike, it is often the case that those who survive thank God for sparing them from death and destruction.

And yet what about those who don't survive...
those who aren't spared?

Expressions of thanksgiving on the part of those who do survive can too easily come across as self-serving, pious gobbledygook.

Yet if we think about it more deeply,
does it mean that the people who did not survive were cursed?

Does it mean that the places that were devastated were deserving of it?

It has been just over ten years since Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast and flooded the city of New Orleans.

At the time a well-known TV evangelist said the flooding was God's judgement on New Orleans for hosting a gay pride parade.

So that means those thousands of displaced persons—
all those desperate people who showed up at the Super Bowl and the convention center,
all the people who drowned alone in their homes and those who had to be rescued off roof tops and who lost everything—
they all somehow had it coming to them? Really?

Or is this too an example of "counsel without knowledge"...
the very lie Job's friends were telling him?

From our limited perspective and in our finite state of mind,
how can we know whether or not something is God's judgment?

In 1985, the Rev. Pat Robertson claimed to have prayed Hurricane Gloria away from Virginia Beach, headquarters of his Christian Broadcasting Network.

And so the devastation that Gloria caused elsewhere was God's judgment? Really?

The fact is, the hurricane does not know the righteous from the unrighteous,
nor is it an expression of God's wrath.

It has purposes of its own that reason cannot comprehend.

We must never give in to the temptation to personalize such disasters.

We can thank God when we are kept safe and give even greater expression to our thanks by contributing and working for the relief and comfort of those who were not so fortunate.

Not only does that ultimately turn God into a monster,
it fails to demonstrate a humility that knows that we are not God's equal,
nor are we the masters of the universe that the last 150 years of
science and philosophy have tried to tell us we are.

We cannot know the meaning behind all things.

What we can know is that though such chaos is beyond our own control,
it is not beyond the constraint of God.

There is more going on in the chaos than we can ever comprehend.

After all, so much more was going on in Job's chaos.

So much more was at stake in the wager God made with the *satan*, the Accuser,
a wager Job didn't know anything about.

So much more is going on in life than you and I can ever know.

That is why silence is often the only appropriate response,
with the confession that we not only belong to,
but are beloved by the One who is Lord of the chaos
and able to bring good from it.

“Glory, shut my mouth!”

IV

“We must not question God” ...but what about Job?

Was Job right to question God...
to challenge the divine sovereignty...
to rail against the chaos?

Absolutely!

Was he right to curse the darkness?

You bet he was!

Was he right in maintaining his own integrity?

For sure!

Right with himself and right with God,
and God says as much to Job’s friends,
not once, but twice:

“You have not spoken rightly about me as my servant Job has.” (42:7, 9)

Job’s vindication is complete, as God turns to him and says,

*“Hear now and I will speak,
I will ask you and you will instruct me,”*

Job responds,

*“I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eyes see you....”*

Job had demanded to see God in order to make his case against what he perceived to be the injustice of the universe.

Now Job has heard God, but even more, now he sees God.

And in that seeing, all Job’s questions simply fall away, and he says...
well, just exactly what does Job say?

The translation of verse six is grammatically complicated

Scholars scratch their heads and have come up with as many as five or six different translations.

The New Revised Standard Version says,

“I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”

Which means God has simply overwhelmed Job and his friends,
 put all of them in their place
 and, once again, might has crushed right into submission.

But this translation contradicts the overall message of the book.

The word translated “despise” can also be translated “reject.”

In Hebrew the verb does not have a direct object—
 that is, Job is not despising or rejecting himself.

And so Job may be saying,

*“I reject and forswear these dust and ashes and their symbol of repentance
 and humility,”*
 for Job had no need of repentance.

This was not about Job’s sin or his arrogance,
 as his friends had insisted.

Or Job might be saying,

*“I regret and retract my right and demand that God appear,
 given that I am nothing but dust and ashes,”*
 thus striking a note of humility.

This is how the Jewish Publication Society translates this verse:

“Therefore, I recant and relent, being but dust and ashes.”

One scholar, Gerald Janzen, who taught Old Testament at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis for many years, translates verse 6 as,

Therefore I recant and change my mind regarding dust and ashes.

The Common English Bible comes closest to what I think is the correct interpretation:

“Therefore, I relent and find comfort on dust and ashes.”

In this interpretation, Job is not denigrating himself
or denying who he is and the validity of his own experience.

To do so would be not only a denial of his own integrity,
but also counter to what God has already said—
that Job was vindicated;
his suffering was undeserved and innocent.

It is reasonable to think of Job retracting and rejecting what he has previously
believed about God punishing the evil and blessing the righteous.

And Job can retract his case against God because now,
though he is but dust and ashes,
he has heard and seen firsthand that God is on his side,
just as he had insisted earlier.

God is, after all, not only on Job’s side,
but on the side of all who are but dust and ashes.

Even Job’s friends are given an opportunity to repent,
which God accepts.

Job was not godforsaken.

He was simply caught up in the larger drama of proving what God already knew to
be true...

that Job loved God,
not for what was in it for him,
but because of who God is.

Remember, the wager was that, in the end, Job would curse God;
but Job did not.

And so Job has justified not only himself,
but God and God's confidence in him.

Job suffered for God's sake.

There was another,
of whom Job is an archetype,
who also suffered for God's sake
and for the world's—
someone who,
in his inexplicable, innocent suffering,
became the Redeemer of the world.

And so we recognize that there is more going on in suffering
than we will ever understand this side of heaven.

V

The final eight verses of Job describe how the Lord restores Job's fortunes to twice
the wealth he had before and ten more children.

However, many students of the Bible are troubled by this ending—
it sounds too much like a Disney fairy tale—
"...and they all lived happily ever after."

Some scholars go so far as to suggest that these verses were added to the book
much later to make the ending more palatable.

I mean...he just gets everything back, times two?

And, that's supposed to make it all better?

And the ten kids he fathers after the ordeal are supposed to make up for the
ten who died?

And his brothers and sisters—where were they when Job was in the pit of
despair?

Now they show up to offer comfort and support?

But it is important to remember that we are dealing with a work of poetic fiction...
telling truths that only poetry and fiction can tell.

The underlying message is what matters most.

The Book of Job deals with the nature of evil and misfortune in our lives.

It reminds us that terrible things can happen to even the very best of us.

It boldly proclaims that such things are not punishments from God,
nor are they demonstrations of divine indifference and impotence.

The end of the Book of Job tells us something else:
when the dark night is over,
the sun also rises.

With God there is always the promise of restoration...hope...resurrection.

We don't know when it will come.

We don't know how deep the darkness will get,
or how long it will hang over us like a shroud.

We don't know how many valleys of the shadow of death
we will have to traverse.

But we do know that God is always with us,
and restoration is always God's way.

It rained forty days and forty nights and water covered the earth for nearly a year
before the dry land appeared,

Noah and his family were able to leave the ark,
and God's rainbow of promise hung in the sky.

God's people were slaves to Pharaoh for years
before God sent Moses to bring them out of Egypt,
and then it took them forty years to get to the Promised Land.

Jerusalem was sacked,
 the Temple destroyed,
 and God's people hauled off to Babylon as slaves for seventy years,
 before they returned to rebuild their holy city.

God incarnate was beaten,
 mocked,
 brutally killed on a Roman cross,
 and laid in a borrowed tomb...
 before Jesus walked out of that tomb.

Job entered the abyss,
 but he climbed out...
 or, you might say, he was carried out.

The ending of Job is a reminder to anyone sitting in the ashes—
 and to all of us who will one day sit in the ashes—
 that as bad as things may get,
 as low as we may feel,
one day all shall be made right again.

We can curse God and die.

Or we can remember that we belong to the One who is Lord of all,
 who made all that is,
 and who promises that nothing in life or in death
 will ever be able to separate us
 from the love of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

As with Job, we know that our Redeemer lives,
 and at the last, we will see him on our side,
 and, in our flesh, we shall see God face to face.

And that, my friends, is Wisdom's Word on Suffering.

Glory, shut my mouth!

Amen.

Sources:

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