

Massanutten Presbyterian Church
June 21, 2009
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A Divine Perspective

Job 38:1-11

Several years ago I sat at the bedside of a woman who was anticipating an amputation procedure. It was not her first – in fact as I recall, it was her 3rd or 4th. As each surgery had come and gone, a piece of her life had changed leaving her in what seemed to me to be a very despondent, chaotic place. Her story tugged at me and I longed to offer her the words – the *right* words – that could make her feel better and would answer the deep questions welling up inside her. I made a feeble effort, but as I reflected later with colleagues, fell far short of what I'd hoped to do.

It's awfully tempting, isn't it – to help by offering solutions to problems or questions. Our quest for neatness and closure seems to veer us in the direction of resolving the clear inconsistencies between what we have come to expect or understand about life, and how things actually transpire. Even in the admittedly inexactness of ministry, we in the church strive to give and receive answers which quell the discomfort of those murky moments in life:

God won't give us more than we can bear.

It must or must not have been God's will.

It'll all work out for the best.

Variations on these words abound, as we seek to offer comfort and be consoled. They roll off our tongues like a line from a well rehearsed drama seeking to convince the audience of its authenticity. And sometimes they work, and we, like the audience in that play, move on to the next scene expectantly – looking forward to what's in store.

But not always, and if we are very honest, and look very closely, perhaps those answers are not even very often the right answers. It is this very dilemma in which we find Job.

The book of Job is the classic Biblical text we turn to when we are exploring the hard question:

Why do bad things happen to good people?

because what we know of Job, the person fits our definition of a faithful and good person. The first words we read, describing Job are:

That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.

So conscientious was Job about his relationship with God that he would practice what we might call, preventative penance, rising early in the morning to offer burnt offerings.

"It may be that one of my children have sinned..." he would say.

Job was also a man of good fortune. He had a wife, sons, daughters, and a very large estate. Life was good for Job and his family. And then things changed, quickly and dramatically. His property was destroyed; sons and daughters were killed in a freak blast of wind and his health was taken from him, leaving him poor, childless and sick.

And confused. What does a righteous, God-fearing man do with all that tragedy – all that loss? How does one reconcile a faithful life seemingly left in ruins? What do we do when the conventional wisdom of life has nothing to say about the circumstances in which we find ourselves?

All of that happens in the first 2 chapters of the book, and then in the 36 chapters that follow, Job is counseled by friends who seem to mean well, as they attempt to persuade Job of his role in this mess. Using that same conventional wisdom, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar come to his side urging him to take responsibility for the calamity in his life. Job's response is a consistent protest of guilt, and affirmation of innocence, even as he lifts up alternately heartbreaking and angry pleas for God's intervention and help. Another source of help comes unbidden in Elihu, a younger voice, offering his own summary and explanation for Job's plight.

Although from where we sit today, these four voices seem to be terribly aggressive and unwelcome to our ears, their sincerity isn't in question, and it truly seems as if they were trying to help Job cope with a level of trauma that is beyond comprehension. Any one of Job's misfortunes would be overwhelming, and his friends and advisors were doing their best to help Job weather the storm.

Isn't that what we want when we're hurting? Isn't that what we want to offer those we love in the midst of their pain and anguish? But when those answers don't work; when what's been said again and again doesn't reach into the depths of our heart and soul, those words can push us deeper into the murkiness of grief and loss, leaving us searching for that which can really sustain us and give us a foundation on which to begin to move forward.

Perhaps it is because of those moments when I've sat at bed sides, listened to those whose lives seem to be a never ending chain of unfortunate events, or looked for answers myself, that I have come to love and hold closely the words we finally come to in the 38th chapter of Job – just about at the end of the book.

Noticeably absent in the previous 36 chapters is the voice of God. But, as we begin to read in verse one of chapter 38, though we don't hear from God, it is very clear God had been present throughout the entire discourse – and God is ready to respond.

The 11 verses in our passage today, are just a taste of the Lord's message to Job. In the verses that follow, Job is not so gently reminded that without his help, God created the world and all that's in it, attending to details large and small. Job's hubris is put in its place as God speaks from the whirlwind:

*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 to me.
“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?”*

As God responds to the lengthy and elaborate speeches of Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar and Elihu and to the protests and cries of Job, the relation of Creator to Creation breaks through and Job's sense of his place in the great expanse that is the universe begins to emerge.

Again, to our ears, God's tone and energy here, along with Job's indignant tone throughout these 36 chapters seem foreign to us. The language, directness and elaborate wording of Job's companions feel audacious and far different from how we might seek out our Lord for solace and assurance in hard times.

And, as we move on to God's response, the questions that are answered are far different from the ones that are asked. In just the first few words from God, Job's 'why' is replaced with the assurance of God's intricate and intimate relationship with everything that Job can see, and that which he can't as well. The presence of God in all things becomes the new starting point for the conversation.

G.K. Chesterton, an English writer of the early 20th century claimed in his Introduction to the Book of Job that we are most helped by paradoxes. There is something strangely comforting about having that which is greater than us, and beyond our full understanding, pointed out in an undeniable sort of way. God's stance as he questions Job lifts up just this

paradox of mystery and witness, as God confronts Job on the process of creation – a creation which Job has enjoyed and lived within throughout his life. Chesterton writes:

'The riddles of God are more satisfying than the solutions of man.'

The counsel of Job's friends that urged him to grip the wisdom of the day and claim it as his own, turned out to be a solution that couldn't begin to touch the pain and anguish of his loss. Yet, the mystery of God at work in the world ultimately calmed his troubled soul, allowing him to let go of his search for answers and hold on to the power of a God who holds the whole world in his hands.

Ultimately, Job was asking the questions of one whose life has moved from order to chaos. These are questions raised in every generation – in every time, as things change and people are left to make sense of the change, discerning God's place within them. In our time the chaos might look like:

- an economic downturn leaving casualties in the shape of hardworking families that have lost income and stability;
- the devastation left by a hurricane, ravaging communities and leaving thousands homeless;
- the oppression resulting from a regime change that strips people of dignity and rights;
- the advent of illness and disease that holds captive the hopes and dreams of individuals and families;
- or the ongoing battle to find peace in the midst of lives and places where heartache is ever-present;

These and so many other circumstances in our lives help us to sympathize and identify with Job's quest for answers. And like Job, we find conventional wisdom filled with holes when it comes to the deep longings in our heart for an antidote to the chaos. When things are out of control, we need to know that beyond ourselves there is an order and purposefulness to life. God's response to Job's questions of 'why' fills this need for a greater and larger order than what we see in our midst. That his life was chaos didn't change but when reminded of God and God's ultimate authority over all creation, Job himself was changed.

Short of *a voice from a whirlwind*, how do we hear and help one another to hear God's message of presence and eternal authority in the midst of the chaos in our lives? And what would the ministry of Job's friends look like if that was the comfort they were seeking to offer?

One of my favorite quotes comes from Nicholas Wolsterhoff, in his book Lament for a Son (Erdmans, 1987). His son had died in a skiing accident and the book recounts his experience of grief. Part of that experience includes the response of family and friends to his loss, and the difficulty they had in approaching him – in knowing what to say. Wolsterhoff wrote,

*'To comfort me you have to come close.
Come sit beside me on my mourning bench.'*

In other words: 'come, and enter into the chaos of life and be a companion in the experience of grief – whatever it may be.' God's not so subtle reminder to Job that He is in all things and in all times, may be difficult to see when the foundation of our world is rocked. As the church, we are called to remind each other of and be for each other the presence of God in the midst of all things: joy and tragedy alike. Words may be a part of this, but so also may silence, as we allow the spirit of God to work through the companionship of the body of Christ. Let us pray,

*O God, enter into the hard places of our lives in such a way that we are
comforted by your presence.
Lead as we help to each other see you at work in all things.
Through Christ, Amen.*