

“God in the Whirlwind”

Job 38:1-7

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When I was much young, impetuous and wanting immediate results, I didn't appreciate how important the set-up was to a great finale.

When my parents or an older sibling would read to me from a great big book of Aesop's fables that we had, I would look at the brilliant illustrations on one page and tell whoever was reading to just read the ending moral of the story at the bottom of the next page. So, when I heard the moral that went, "you are known by the company you keep," I had no knowledge of the stork who ended up being shot by the farmer because he was hanging around the crows who were eating the farmer's corn. The fable was told to kids so they would make wise decisions about who they chose as friends, but all I knew was the punch line that didn't convey much without the rest of the story.

The set up, the details, the back story, are critical if the moral is going to have any meaning or power.

This is especially true regarding the biblical story of Job and our passage from the book of Job this morning.

Chapter 38 is close to the end of the book. This chapter is the climax of human suffering and existential arguing that has been going on for 37 chapters. After being silent and listening to the anguish, anger and condemnation of Job and his supposed friends for what seems an unending amount of time, God finally responds, God answers the accusations that are made by Job.

Now it would not be right or helpful for me to address God's whirlwind speech without first laying some of the groundwork – as I said earlier it makes no sense to hear the moral of the story without first hearing the story.

The book of Job begins with a conversation between God and one of his protective angels. Not wanting God to be duped by fair weather followers, God's angel wants to put Job through a series of tests to show God that people only remain faithful when things are going well for them.

In some ways this angel's analysis is the opposite of what we might say today. Now we talk of people only turning to God when they/we are in difficulty or need. We have heard of people promising to be better, or go to church, or read their Bible everyday if God will just get them out of a fix or bring a loved one through a life threatening illness. For many of us, the notion that God has much to do with our successes and therefore warranting our gratitude and loyalty, is a foreign idea.

In Job's day people believed that wealth and power were signs of God's favor, and hardship was the result of divine punishment for sinful living. But this idea was of human origin, not God's, and God's angel wanted to expose rich people for being loyal to God only when they were doing well.

So God gives his angel permission to test Job in order to see if Job would be faithful when life was full of suffering.

The angel systematically destroys Job's livestock, his crops, his home, his children and his wife, and finally the angel attacks Job's body causing sores and boils to cover his skin. But in all this Job never curses God,

he never blames God, which is why we say of people who are not easily upset, that they have “the patience of Job.”

The vast majority of the book of Job consists of Job arguing with friends who say that Job’s hardships are punishment from God for all his sinful actions, and Job who says he has done nothing wrong and that hardships are not punishment from God. Job’s friends are cruel in their accusations, they offer no comfort or consolation to this man who is grieving and suffering.

Finally, Job cannot argue with his friends any longer. Job knows that they are horrified by the thought that they could lose everything just as Job did, so Job directs his questions and anguish toward God.

He screams for God to answer, he pleads for God to show him/her self. Job wants God to vindicate him before his friends and enemies. But God does not quickly appear, not even an angel comes to him. Job does not relent. One of his inquisitors says: “Do you think challenging God is just? You say, ‘I will be cleared by God.’ Yet you ask him, ‘What profit is it to me and what do I gain by not sinning?’”

This is one of the great questions in the book of Job. It is a question for ancient times and it is a question for us today. “What profit is it to you or I, what do we gain by not being selfish, or greedy, or cruel, or violent, or pompous, or whatever?”

What profit or gain comes to people of faith?

This is the set-up, this is the emotional, existential background of what use is God to us? And in a similar vein, of what use are we to God?

These are immense questions. They are questions seldom asked because they are to some blasphemous and to others frightening. These are questions that move us into uncharted darkness from which we are uncertain that we will emerge. Though his friends did all they could to turn Job away from his journey, he does not relent and we are dragged along with him.

Job’s journey is an “all in” journey. He will either win it all or lose it all, but a person who has been stripped of wealth, family, and even his physical health feels like there is little else to lose.

One inquisitor, Eliphaz, tries to tell Job to look at the majesty of creation to see God’s true presence and nature, but Job is not satisfied with human answers, he will only be satisfied when God speaks to him, he will only be satisfied with God’s answer.

You and I have heard how God and his angel have conspired to test Job, which I have felt God must answer for – it is manipulative, unfair, even abusive. You and I have heard the arguments, the raw questions, the fears, pain and grief, and we have been led to believe that God should answer Job, and his answers better be good and contrite! The case against God has been brilliantly established and God must answer - and answer God does.

Our passage from Job is God’s answer: “Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, the storm. God said: Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself, I will question you, and you shall answer me! Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know. On what were its footings set, while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy? This far you may come but no farther, here is where your proud waves stop.”

For four chapters God goes on with power and authority, speaking of all that has taken place in splendor and beauty. Eliphaz had tried to say the very same things to Job, but it wasn't just the listing of God's deeds that Job needed, it was God that Job needed to encounter. God does not answer, at least not directly, the question "What is gained by not sinning?" or "What is gained through faith?" And God never answers the charge that he wrongly tested Job, bringing pain and loss. It is as if God doesn't consider the charge to be valid - it is more a charge of human speculation born out of confusion and human imaginings.

After his tenacious battle to have God answer, Job seems to be amazingly satisfied. Job's last words are these: "My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

The first time I read the whole book of Job was back in college. I loved Job's fight. He was my champion, he was asking my questions and I wanted God to answer them.

I hated the ending of the story. Job had given in without adequate answers. I was disappointed and unsatisfied that God had gotten off the hook so easily. God's resume of great deeds did not address suffering in the world; it didn't answer why rotten people can profit so much and good people can be so poor; it didn't answer why life seems so random or why there are both good times and difficult. At the end of Job's story I had more questions than answers, and I still do today.

The real question that I ask today however, is not about what I gain or profit from trying to live faithfully, the real question I ask now is whether I can say with Job, "I know that God can do all things, no plan of God's can be thwarted." The real question for me, and I think for us all, is do we trust in God's loving presence? It is the faith question. The way we answer this question means everything for how we live.