

“Where Were You When I Laid the Foundation of the Earth?”

Job 38:1-7, 34-41

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

October 17, 2021

Job had lost everything: his flocks, his children, his health. Even ... his faith. He curses the day of the birth, he wishes he was dead. His friends have been trying to comfort him. They've also been arguing with him. They think – they are *convinced* – that Job must have done something horribly wrong to deserve all this. God is a *good* God, a *just* God; God doesn't just mete out this kind of suffering on people unless it's a punishment for some horrible sin. So Job must have done something *very, very bad*.

But Job knows the truth: he has been upright in all his deeds; he is the epitome of integrity and righteousness. His friends' words are worthless and insulting. He knows he is in the right. Which means, *God* must be in the wrong. He wants to take his case to God. He wants answers from God.

Why do the wicked prosper? Why does God allow them to trample the poor? Why does God disregard the prayer of the wounded and dying? Why are there murderers, adulterers, and rapists?

Job blames God. He says, God has “taken away my right;” God has “made my soul bitter.” Job knows the conventional wisdom: wicked people are punished; God metes out divine justice. But is that truly “wisdom”? “Where,” Job asks, “shall wisdom be found? Where is the place of understanding? Mortals do not know the way to it, and it is not found in the land of the living.... It cannot be gotten for gold ... the price of wisdom is above pearls.... Where then does wisdom come from? ... It is hidden from the eyes of all living.” Humans, says Job, simply cannot understand true wisdom. All this so-called “wisdom” his friends have been offering him – it's not really *wisdom* at all. Only God knows the way to wisdom; only God knows wisdom's place; only God “sees everything under the heavens.” God said to humankind: “Truly, the fear of the Lord, *that* is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.”

But what do you do when you have spent your life living in the fear of the Lord, and have departed from evil day after day, and *still* you do not feel like you are one step closer to *true* wisdom?

Job looks back to his past, to the days when he was in his prime, when the “friendship of God” was upon Job's tent, when God was still with him. Job had children; he had a respected place in the affairs of the city; he was trusted by both the young and the old; even the princes honored him. Job aided the poor, he helped the orphan, he brought joy to the widow. He was “eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame; ... a father to the needy;” he “championed the cause of the stranger;” he held accountable those who were were unjust. He was in his glory! He “lived like a king among his troops.”

But that was before all those calamities fell upon Job. “Now they make sport of me,” he says; “they mock me in song; ... they do not hesitate to spit at the sight of me.” Job has been humbled by God – for no reason that he can understand. “Terrors are turned upon me ... and my prosperity has passed

away like a cloud.... Now my soul is poured out within me; days of affliction have taken hold of me. The night racks my bones, and the pain that gnaws me takes no rest.” Job says that God has cast him “into the mire.” “I cry to you,” Job says to God, “and you do not answer me.... You have turned cruel to me; with the might of your hand you persecute me.... You toss me about in the roar of the storm.”

The injustice is appalling to Job. Job had heard many people who had cried out to *him* for mercy and justice – so why will *God* not hear *Job*, when *Job* cries out? “My inward parts are in turmoil!” If Job has truly done something wrong, then he can accept this. “If I have walked with falsehood ... let me be weighed in a just balance.... If my step has turned aside from the way ... if my heart has been enticed by a woman ... if I have rejected the cause of my servants when they brought a complaint against me ... if I have withheld anything that the poor desired, or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail ... if I have seen anyone perish for lack of clothing ... if I have raised my hand against the orphan ... then let my shoulder blade fall from my shoulder, and let my arm be broken from its socket.... If I have made gold my trust ... if I have rejoiced at the ruin of those who hated me, or exulted when evil overtook them ... if my land has cried out against me ... let thorns grow instead of wheat, and foul weeds instead of barley!”

And Job’s three friends are silent. They have no answer that will satisfy Job’s many questions.

A young man, Elihu, dares to speak. “I also will give my answer,” Elihu says; “I also will declare my opinion.” He looks at Job and says, “In this you are not right.... God is greater than any mortal. Why do you contend against him?” Why, asks Elihu, do you claim that God is not answering you? For God speaks in dreams and visions, “when deep sleep falls on mortals, when they slumber on their beds.” When a person is suffering from pain, or drawing close to death, is there not an angel of God, sent by God to give that person a message? When a person prays, does not God repay them for their righteousness? “Pay heed, Job,” says Elihu, “listen to me! ... Be silent, and I will teach you wisdom!” Elihu questions whether Job is truly *listening* for God’s voice. He asserts that Job is, right now, rebelling against God. “Job opens his mouth in empty talk; he multiplies words without knowledge.” Elihu says, “Hear this, O Job: stop and consider the wondrous works of God.” God is “great in power and justice.... Mortals fear him” – but “he does not regard any who are wise in their own conceit.” Elihu is saying: stop puffing up yourself up with vain and empty pride, Job. Humble yourself, and truly *listen* for God’s voice.

Biblical commentators through the centuries have not been impressed with Job’s three friends, nor with young Elihu either. All four of them think they are wiser than Job; Elihu even thinks he is wiser than Job’s three friends as well. None of them truly understand the heart of the matter; all of them twist Job’s words. They are all, in their own way, arrogant and foolish. Beware people who think they know all the answers to the world’s many questions. Sometimes people are more prideful than wise.

Job says nothing. Job’s friends say nothing. For a brief moment, all is silent. Job’s questions, Job’s accusations against God, go unanswered. That silence can be deafening. We’ve all been there, right, when we’ve had hard questions for God, questions that feel like they have no answers. We’ve all questioned, in confusion, or in frustration, or in downright anger. We’ve all wondered, “*Where is God?*”

Well. Here is where things take a significant turn. Because suddenly, out of nowhere, out of a whirlwind, comes God’s voice. God has indeed heard Job’s many questions, and God now *speaks*.

God’s first words: “Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man. I will question *you*, and *you* shall declare to *me!*” Get ready, folks – here it comes!

“Where were *you* when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding! Who determined its measurements? ... Who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?” Where were *you*, Job, when God created the heavens and the earth? Were you *anywhere*? Did you even *exist*? “Who shut in the sea?” Did *you*, Job, mark the boundary lines between the heavens and the earth, and between the land and the oceans? Do you even have any *idea* how God did that? “Have you commanded the morning ... and caused the dawn to know its place?” Are *you* the one, Job, who causes the sun to rise in the mornings, bringing light and heat upon the earth? “Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?” The answers are *no, no, no, no, and no*; no mortal – not even a good and righteous man filled with integrity – can answer “yes” to any of those questions! Where does light live? Where does darkness reside? Where did each of them come from? Do you have *any* idea? What about the snow and the hail – do you know where *they* come from? How about the wind – what generates it? The rain and the thunder – what causes them? Who created all of that? Does the rain have a father? Does ice have a mother? What about the bright stars in the sky, and the great constellations? Pleiades and Orion; the great Bear, Ursa Major? Can you make them *stop moving* through the sky? Can you *move clouds around* in the sky? Can you make lightning go where *you* want it to? Look at the animals, the lions and the ravens – how do they know where to go to find food? Do you know when the mountain goats are going to give birth? Why are there wild donkeys in the mountains? Why can humans not tame wild oxen? Why does an ostrich have wings, but can’t fly? Why are horses so strong? How do birds know when to fly south? How do eagles know to make their nests so high?

God’s questions to Job go on, and on. Like Job’s questions to God, they just keep going. Does Job know the answer to *any* of them? Do *we*? Sure, with our modern scientific understandings, we know a lot more about the cosmos and about the natural world than people did back then, but still, ask any astronomer, any geologist, any biologist, any zoologist – there are still a *multitude* of questions we do not yet have answers to. The universe is that great, that marvelous, and that utterly *mysterious*!

Finally, God pauses. God says to Job, “Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Anyone who argues with God must respond.” God is saying, “Okay, Job. It’s your turn. How are *you* going to answer all *my* questions?” To which Job says, “I am of small account.... I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but will proceed no further.” Job realizes: he doesn’t have the answers to *any* of God’s questions. God is stronger than he, more powerful than he, mightier than he. God can do a *vast multitude* of things that Job can only barely begin to fathom. God’s works of creation are astounding; there is such a great diversity of living things, on an incredibly complex earth, in the midst of an astoundingly complicated universe. God’s wisdom is unreachable. God’s wisdom is *unfathomable*. In the face of it all, Job has nothing to say. Absolutely nothing. He is silent before God.

Now, we’re not quite at the end of the book. We’ve still got a couple chapters left to go. And there are still many, *many* unanswered questions. At least Job is beginning to get a sense of his place in the universe. It’s a pretty *small* place, in the grand scheme of things. Perhaps Job had forgotten that. Perhaps we *all* forget that, when we are in pain, or suffering hardship, or wondering “where is God?”

But Job’s questions – *our* questions – those deep theological questions about the *justice* and *goodness* of God that Job has been asking, and that *we* ask – is he going to get any answers? *Are we*?

© 2021 Rev. Bill Pinches