

“God, the Whirlwind & the Environmental Crisis”

Job 38:1-24

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This morning we continue our sermon series on Creation Care, turning again to another passage from the Hebrew Scriptures. Last week we read the opening passage of the Bible, the first story of creation found in Genesis. In that beautiful poetry God created everything in 6 days and called them good, and on the 7th day God stepped back and took a break. Though this passage has been misinterpreted to justify human dominion over creation, our job as creatures made in God’s image is to guide, to take care of, and be responsible for creation, just as a shepherd guards the sheep, just as God takes care of everything. This morning we turn to another passage of poetry in the Old Testament, the beginning of God’s speech to Job in chapter 38. I say beginning because God will speak for the next three chapters til the end of the book. And though we normally read the passage together, this morning I will read the verses printed on the insert and I invite you to listen - paying attention not only to the words but to the tone of these beautiful verses. Let us listen now to God’s Word.

Job 38:1-24 *Common English Bible*

Then the Lord answered Job from the whirlwind:

Who is this darkening counsel
with words lacking knowledge?
Prepare yourself like a man;
I will interrogate you, and you will respond to me.

Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations?
Tell me if you know.
Who set its measurements? Surely you know.
Who stretched a measuring tape on it?
On what were its footings sunk;
 who laid its cornerstone,
 while the morning stars sang in unison
 and all the divine beings shouted?
Who enclosed the Sea behind doors
 when it burst forth from the womb,
 when I made the clouds its garment, the dense clouds its wrap,
 when I imposed my limit for it,
 put on a bar and doors
 and said, “You may come this far, no farther;
 here your proud waves stop”?

In your lifetime have you commanded the morning,
informed the dawn of its place
so it would take hold of earth by its edges
and shake the wicked out of it?

Do you turn it over like clay for a seal,
so it stands out like a colorful garment?
Light is withheld from the wicked,
the uplifted arm broken.

Have you gone to the sea's sources,
walked in the chamber of the deep?
Have death's gates been revealed to you;
can you see the gates of deep darkness?
Have you surveyed earth's expanses?
Tell me if you know everything about it.

Where's the road to the place where light dwells;
darkness, where's it located?
Can you take it to its territory;
do you know the paths to its house?
You know, for you were born then;
you have lived such a long time!

Have you gone to snow's storehouses,
seen the storehouses of hail
that I have reserved for a time of distress,
for a day of battle and war?

What is the way to the place where light is divided up;
the east wind scattered over earth?

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

The Bible is full of fascinating stories and the story of Job ranks up there near the top. The questions and issues raised in this book are ones people have wrestled with for centuries, going all the way back to at least 500 years before the birth of Christ. Before we get to our passage from Job 38 and explore what it can teach us about creation care, we need to go to the beginning. In Eugene Peterson's [The Message](#) translation, the book begins something like this: There once was a man named Job. He was honest inside and out, a man of his word, who was totally devoted to God and hated evil with a passion. He had seven sons and three daughters. He was also very wealthy—seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred teams of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and a huge staff of servants—he was the most influential man in all the East! But without understanding why, this prosperous man suddenly loses everything. He loses his fortune, his ten children all die, and he finds himself sitting on a dung heap at the edge of town where he spends all his time picking at his many scabs and sores.

In his book [God, Job and the Comforting Whirlwind](#), author Bill McKibben claims that Job is not the story of a patient man but rather a very frustrated man (McKibben, p. 1). I'm not sure where the phrase "the patience of Job" comes from, but I agree with McKibben - Job has many reasons to be frustrated! "His problem is not only that he suffers - it is that he suffers without understanding why" (McKibben, p.1). You see, Job does not know that the accuser (satan) had made a wager with God, an experiment to see if the righteous Job would remain faithful to God even if he lost everything. So the plot unfolds - Job is being tested, and his three best friends come to comfort him in his despair. For the first week they do the right thing - they sit with him, cry with him, mourn with him over his losses. "Finally, however, they begin to talk" (McKibben, p. 2). And they talk and talk and talk for 29 chapters, repeating again and again that they believe Job is suffering for one reason, that it is because of his sin. God alone is just and Job is the one who is guilty! They accuse him of crimes such as cheating his debtors, stealing food from the hungry, even mistreating the widows and the orphans. And if that wasn't bad enough, they tell Job the same is true for his children - they must have been evil, too! Chapter by chapter, their speeches grow more and more hostile. It's your fault Job - repent and get over your suffering! (McKibben, pp. 2-3).

What the friends are saying to Job is the conventional wisdom of the day, the belief that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. We see glimpses of this theology throughout the Bible, like in our call to worship this morning that Sheila led us in. "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path that sinners take. But rather, their delight is in the law of the Lord... They are like trees planted by streams of water... In all that they do, they prosper" (Psalm 1.1-3). The opposite is also implied to be true - those who do wicked things will be punished for their evil. Many today still believe in this so-called "prosperity" gospel, based on the faulty assumption that good things happen to good people, bad things happen to bad ones. But as you probably know from experience, this conventional wisdom doesn't always hold up. A young child is diagnosed with cancer; a hardworking mom or dad is killed in a car crash and a family ends up with nowhere to go... sometimes innocent people like Job do suffer for no reason. And what we know about Job is that he truly IS innocent, and he spends a lot of energy giving many speeches defending his character and integrity. He pushes back against the conventional wisdom of the day, challenging the truth that everyone assumed to be true. In the end Job is worn out - tired of arguing with his friends, tired of waiting on God to vindicate him. At his lowest he says, "If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face" (23.17).

But when we come to today's passage, chapter 38, God finally breaks the silence and responds to Job. And God's response is not what you might expect. God doesn't say, "Job you are right - I made a silly bet with Satan and you have remained faithful, so now is the time to be rewarded!" And God doesn't say, "Job, you may have been good and righteous on the outside but you had a prideful heart on the inside, so your suffering was a test to make you stronger - so just repent of your pride and all will be good!" Instead, God does something else - he responds with a series of questions aimed at putting Job in his place. Questions like, *"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations? In your lifetime have you commanded the morning? Have you gone to the sea's sources, walked in the chamber of the deep? Where's the road to the place where light dwells; do you know where the darkness is located?"* With these and other questions God makes it clear that God alone is the Creator, and though Job may be a righteous man, he is not God! Similar to Genesis 1, we hear about God's majesty and power. With the skill of a master builder and architect, God fashions the earth and

all of creation into a Temple. My favorite image is how God seems to act like a midwife - the waters break, the seas are given birth, and they are wrapped in swaddling bands of clouds and darkness (Carol Newsom, [New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IV](#), p. 602). And way before there are any humans, the morning stars and angels sing for joy as God puts in the footings and lays the cornerstone of Earth's foundation. In fact, throughout God's speech there are no humans at all!

I recently signed up for a daily prayer message on Facebook that gets sent to me every morning at 7:30AM. Whenever I see the notification on my phone, I click on it, read it and offer some prayer. I suspect some of you have signed up for similar things through email or text. This past week I received a prayer that began like this: "Dear God, thank you for giving *me* another day. Thank you for being close to *me*..." The prayer continued to mention "me" "my" or "I" seven more times in just a couple of sentences. *While the intent of the prayer was no doubt good, what this illustrates I think is the human tendency to make everything revolve around us - our experience, our situation, our lives - me, me, me!* But I think what God is saying to us in this passage is something different. God says, "I think you might have it wrong! What if the world is not all about you?" What if creation is not there just for our use and enjoyment, but we are simply a part of the whole? What if the mountains are for the goats, the streams are for the fish, the dawn that comes each morning for lighting the path for all God's creatures? Before Copernicus gave us a different perspective, that all the planets revolved around the sun, many believed we were at the center of the universe, that everything revolved around us. Unfortunately, it's easy to slip back into centering everything around our experience. *But I believe embracing this type of creaturely humility is so important if we want to be about the healing of creation.*

But what about poor Job? What about his suffering? Is it fair to say Job should just get over it, and simply not dwell on it? While there are other passages in the Bible that say important things about suffering - that God is near to the brokenhearted (Psalm 34.18), that suffering can lead to endurance (Romans 5.3-4) - this passage says something different. After listening to Job and his friends go back and forth for so many chapters, God no longer finds it possible to stay silent (McKibben, p. 27)! In the whirlwind speech God says in effect, "Job, take a deep breath- you are a creature and not the creator!" God does not even respond to Job's concrete problems, such as the loss of his property or his family. And while this may be upsetting for us to hear, it seems like Job is able to get it (Gutierrez quoted in McKibben, p. 27). After God finally stops speaking several chapters later, Job simply says to God, "See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth" (40.4 NRSVUE).

My friends, in the scope of God's entire universe, we are very small indeed. It's not all about us! We are just a part of creation, and not the whole. While we may sing as children the song, "Yes, Jesus loves me!" we must not forget that John 3.16 says "God so loved the world" meaning the whole cosmos! So the lesson for today seems to be the invitation to embrace our creaturely humility - not to beat ourselves up or dismiss our responsibilities and our role in caring for creation - but to accept our rightful place in creation - and to embrace the truth that we are dust and to dust we shall return.

To God be the glory, now and always. Amen.