

“God Provides”

21 October 2018: 22nd Sunday after Pentecost

Salado UMC—Salado, Texas

Preaching Text: Job 38:1-7 (34-41)

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“Providence protects children and idiots. I know because I have tested it” (Mark Twain).

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We all learn by asking questions: children, students, and most adults. We learn by questioning—the plainest and most effective way to learn. Some people who know everything don’t ask questions. Yet, gifted thinkers rarely stop asking questions.

When Greg Dyke became Director-General of the BBC in 2000 he went to every major location and assembled the staff. They expected a long “boss-type” presentation. Instead, he simply asked a question, “What is the one thing I should do to make things better for you?” Then he listened. He followed this with another question, “What is the one thing I should do to make things better for our viewers and listeners?” Dyke knew that he could learn more from his employees than they could from him. The workers at the BBC were eager to share their wonderful ideas. That their new boss took time to question and listen earned him enormous respect.

Columbo solved mysteries by questions; as do great detectives—both fictional and real. Sober inventors/scientists ask questions. Darwin asked, “Why do the Galapagos islands have so many species not found elsewhere?” Einstein asked, “What would the universe look like from a beam of light?” Vital questions start a process that leads to logical advances (<http://www.innovationmanagement.se/imtool-articles/ask-questions/>).

As people age, why do some stop asking questions? A handful stop because they are lazy. Others assume they know enough. A few cling to their beliefs and assumptions—yet often look foolish. Certain people fear they will look weak, ignorant, or unsure. Yet, asking questions is a sign of strength and intelligence—not of weakness or doubt. Great leaders constantly ask questions and are well aware that they do not have all the answers. Intelligent questions stimulate, inform, and inspire.

Faithful people rarely tire asking theological questions. Perhaps, “Why do people suffer?” or “How can God love a sinner like me?” or even, “If you know everything God, then why must I tell you my problems in prayer?” We all wrestle with questions to ask God. We have a list of queries when we meet God face to face. Yet, how often have we considered that God might have a list of questions to ask us? In fact, deep in Job and from the whirlwind, Yahweh speaks. God confronts Job (Job 38:2-7):

1 Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: 2 “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? 3 Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. 4 “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. 5 Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? 6 On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone 7 when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

34 “Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, so that a flood of waters may cover you? 35 Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go and say to you, ‘Here we are’? 36 Who has put wisdom in the inward parts, or given understanding to the mind? 37 Who has the wisdom to number the clouds? Or who can tilt the

waterskins of the heavens, 38 when the dust runs into a mass and the clods cling together? 39 “Can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions, 40 when they crouch in their dens, or lie in wait in their covert? 41 Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food” (Job 38:1-7 (34-41)?

God’s questions to Job let humans ponder life from many angles. For example, my long-time friend Brian Young offered a cartoon that reveals a new “Waldo” viewpoint. Waldo sits at a bar and remarks to no one in particular: “Nobody ever asks ‘How’s Waldo?’ ” The angle of our questions reveals the trajectory of our lives. God’s too!

The Bible portrays God as One who acts in history: God sends a flood, God converses with Abraham, God parts the waters for the Hebrews, God sends the Assyrians/Babylonians to destroy Israel/Judah for breaking their covenant with Yahweh. Also, God is a moral agent. Everything God does is righteous. In Job, the Bible puts these assumptions about God to the test. Job’s suffering is of an innocent. Job challenges the very justice of God as the universe’s ruler. Job waits upon God to answer this challenge—which Job throws down with an extensive series of questions.

But God’s whirlwind answer to Job puts the justice issue (*theodicy*) on an entirely new plane. Job’s story reveals God as creator whose wisdom and power surpass the human mind. God states: “I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding” (38:3-4). God’s disclosure of grandeur and majesty humbles Job, who says, “I have uttered what I did not understand . . . Therefore, I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (42:3, 6). Yet God’s answer to Job is not really an answer. It poses a new question, i.e., whether human beings can even understand God or God’s ways (*Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4*).

When honest, we know that we are merely mortal and that we do not even begin to fathom God’s incomparable nature. Yet, we are human and curious. We have other questions, too. Like Job, we want to know why.

Why did I get sick?

Why was my son the one in that car wreck?

Why did I get stuck with a job for the third time in a row that downsized?

Why am I still living when all my friends are gone?

No one can answer such questions. No one needs to. Questions are more vital than answers. Why do we ask when we know all too well that there is no answer?

Job spends much of the thirty-seven previous chapters asking why, in one form or another. Job’s friends have blown hard trying to say why. God risks that Job will never relate to God again. The reason is God’s response, not about Job’s “why,” but rather about creation’s grandeur, beauty, and order. If asking why is some feeble human attempt to get control of life and bring life to sense and better management, then God’s response offers us even less control. In fact, our concerns are wholly minor to God’s questions. God has a universe to run, and we are only one among many species. Yet, in this reality, perhaps we humans can trust God’s providence.

Will it be a comfort to Job to know that his concerns are absurdly minor in the grand scheme of things? Will Job get caught up in the wonder of creation and forget his sores? Will we ever see the triviality of many of our questions and issues? Can we trust the God of all creation?

The utter indifference of nature to the concerns of human beings is the closest we come to grasping God's response here. Nature writers and poets marvel continually at the world's vagueness to human passions. "Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine," writes poet Mary Oliver. "Meanwhile the world goes on . . . meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air, are heading home again" (*ibid.*, *Feasting on the Word*).

The citizens of Feldkirch, Austria, didn't know what to do. Napoleon's massive army was preparing to attack. Soldiers had been spotted on the heights above the little town, situated on the Austrian border. A citizen's council was hastily called to decide whether or not they should defend themselves or display the white flag of surrender. It was Easter Sunday, and the people had gathered at church.

The pastor said, "Friends, we have been counting on our own strength, and apparently we have failed. Today is the day of our Lord's resurrection, so why should we not simply ring the bells, have services as usual, and leave the matter in God's hands? We know only our weakness, and not the power of God to defend us." The council accepted his plan and the church bells rang.

The French enemy, hearing the sudden tolling, concluded that the Austrian army had arrived during the night to defend the town. Before the service ended, the enemy broke camp and left (*Source Unknown*).

Sometimes our task is to do what we know and leave the rest to God.

David N. Mosser, Salado UMC Salado, TX 76571