

God Beyond All Human Conceiving

From the sermon series on the Book of Job

Job 38:1,4; Job 40:3-4, 6-14; Job 42:8, translated by Stephen Mitchell

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

"Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:... Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Job 38:1,4

"Then Job answered the Lord: See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth." Job 40:3-4

"Then the Unnameable again spoke to Job from within the whirlwind: Do you dare deny my judgment? Am I wrong because you are right?

... Dress yourself like an emperor. Climb up onto your throne. Unleash your savage justice. Cut down the rich and the mighty. Make the proud man grovel. Pluck the wicked from their perch. Push them into the grave, Throw them, screaming, to hell. Then I will admit that your own strength can save you." Job 40:6-14

"Then Job said to the Unnameable,.. I have spoken of the unspeakable and tried to grasp the infinite. Job 42:3

Well, we've got two more shots at Job—if you can bear it. Today in a voice out of the whirlwind—God shows up. Next week we come back full cycle to the mystery of suffering, trusting in the darkness. I wish I could preach both sermons back to back because they really belong together. I'd be willing to do it, if you'd be willing to sit through it, and be willing to let me take two offerings. (Laughter) I suppose we had just better stick with two weeks, and you'll have to remember this week that I don't say everything that needs to be said about this whole issue. I make these comments to begin with because the voice out of the whirlwind is not a soothing voice, and the God, revealed in the dramatic images of this whirlwind experience of Job, is not a kind of comfy, cozy, divine parent. As we talk about the God out of the whirlwind, don't hear me deny the comforts of religious faith. But hear me suggest that maybe some of the ideas and conceptions that we have about God, if we may be like Job, will need to be de-constructed in order that we may be transformed with a deeper insight and a larger understanding of God. How then should you listen to this sermon? Well, listen to this sermon as you ought to listen to every sermon. Don't take it too seriously, but hear it as a probing of mysteries that lie beyond our comprehension; hear it not as a dogmatic claim of what is, but rather my best insight— knowing that in my

insight cannot be your answer, because your answer must be your answer. If you were to borrow my answer as your answer, it would crumble in the crunch. Finally, I must place my feet, and finally you must place your feet too. So, let's begin.

Note, in the first place, that Job shared the flawed theology of his friends. That may surprise you, but think about it for a moment. He and his friends really go at each other, but as a matter of fact they both shared the conventional wisdom, the orthodox view we've been talking about. Job and his friends knew that God is into the business of rewarding virtue and punishing sin. And they all agreed that if one is suffering, then one has sinned, because that's the business of God—rewarding virtue and punishing, causing suffering for the sinful.

But then Job had a problem because he began to suffer—terribly. And he knew he was innocent. So, not asking himself whether he had the major premise right, but rather knowing that he was suffering, and suffering is supposed to be the consequence of sinning, and knowing that he is innocent he has no alternative but to accuse God of being unjust. So he rails against heaven. Now, that brought his friends to the attack, to defend God. But Job wouldn't hear of it. He knew that he was suffering, and he knew that he was innocent, and therefore he was railing against heaven. There are moments in that dialogue and discussion when it is clear that Job still hung on to God, and somehow believed if only he could get his case heard there was an ultimate justice and truth somewhere. Remember those moving words:

"Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might state my case before him. I go to the right and God is not there. I go to the left and God is not there. I go forward, I go backward, God is absent. Oh, that I knew where I might find God."

Well, God showed up.

In the written piece in the bulletin from William Safire, *The First Dissident*, I love his description of God showing up. It is as if in answer to Job's pathetic cry "Why?" God arrives in a tie-dyed t-shirt on which is emblazoned, "Because I am God, that's why." Then God begins to speak and there is this panoply of cosmic wonder in beautiful poetry of all the things that God is about, and the natural world. Essentially God raises three questions to Job in that first speech: Who are you? Where were you? Are you able? And Job says, "I am nothing. No, I wasn't there." And "No, I am not able." But the interesting thing is that the issue that Job has raised was a question of the suffering of the innocent, and the charge against God was a charge of injustice.

In that whole first speech there is not one single reference to the real issue. God simply sweeps the issue aside and overwhelms Job with cosmic management responsibilities. Thereby, I suppose, the poet is saying what we have said earlier: that retribution is not God's idea, that retribution is not what God is about, that

rewarding the virtuous and punishing the wicked is not God's business. In this whirlwind voice, God with a mighty cosmic sweep, doesn't even make a reference to the real issue of Job's life because it is as though God is saying, "Look, take care of those things yourself. I am not into reward and punishment."

I remember when my kids were little we had a little Volkswagen "bug" in Europe. There were three kids; two in the back seat and one in that little rumble seat. The older two in the back seat were constantly arguing about who had the biggest half. I got so irritated with those kids I finally took a ballpoint pen and on that nice white seat I drew a line down the middle. And I said, "Now don't bother me with that. Take care of that yourselves." Haven't you had your kids come sometimes and they are fighting among themselves and don't you have to say to them, "Go settle that yourself, I've got bigger fish to fry." So, I think God doesn't even make reference to this thing that is so pressing for Job that he says as a matter of fact, "Look, look what I am into!"

Job says, "Well, that's what I figured. I knew if I ever got a chance to take my case to you that I would simply be overwhelmed. I know you are bigger than I am. I never said you weren't, never denied you are really omnipotent, really something. OK, I'll say no more, but I'll still think the same. You're unfair." At which point God begins to blow with mighty bombast, this time saying to Job, "In order to claim your own innocence, you don't have to make me wrong. Go ahead. Make your case for being innocent. As a matter of fact, I know you are innocent. Go ahead. Make your claim for being innocent, but don't base that claim on the fact that I am wrong. Don't accuse me of injustice just because you as an innocent person are suffering. Do you understand anything at all? Let me tell you what I am about as creator of heaven and earth, as manager of the cosmos. Do you know anything about the behemoth, that land monster full of brutality? Have you ever heard of leviathan, the sea monster whose thrashing, lashing tail makes the sea like a boiling cauldron?"

You see, in the ancient Middle East, all peoples in those cultures shared a common idea that creation was not something "boom" out of nothing, but rather that the creator was one who took an existing chaos and was ordering it and fashioning it into something harmonious and beautiful. "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." And the earth was void and empty and was chaotic and the Wind, the breath of God, blew all over the stew, forming out of the chaos cosmos." You remember in Isaiah 2 that marvelous vision of the wolf and the lamb lying down together. The wolf and the lamb lying down together, and no one hurting in all God's holy mountain—that vision of the messianic kingdom of Shalom, that wonderful energizing vision of what would be when God got it all together. And the revelation to John on the Isle of Patmos, chapter 21. You all know it. You have all heard it at every funeral you've ever attended "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth. For the former heaven and earth faded away and there was no more." What? Shame on you—for lack of courage because I know you know it. There was no more sea. I love to live on the edge of the sea

with the gentle waves lapping, or the mighty billows breaking. I can't even imagine the vision of paradise without the sea, but if you had lived in that ancient culture you would have known that the sea was the source of chaos. That's where leviathan lived. So that vision of things to come where the wolf and the lamb would lie down together and they would not hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain was a place of a new heaven and a new earth, and there was no more sea. There was no more threat of chaos. There was no more possibility of the eruption of evil into God's good order.

But not yet. That's what God is saying in this second speech. "Not yet, Job. I am doing the best I can. Oh! Why don't you come and play 'God for a Day.' Come on, Job, get on the throne. Go ahead. If you would act the way you want me to act, O.K., then do it—crush evil, throw the wicked into hell, get everything lined up there. That's the way you want me to do it. Is that the way you would want me to do it? Come on, sit in my place for a day and have absolute power and then see how you would manage this cosmic reality. Because with heavy totalitarian hand you would want me to crush the wicked and destroy all evil, then what you would have me do is to deny the very nature of the reality that I have created ... the values that I value. You would rule out the possibility then of moral choice and freedom of spontaneous worship and adoration, of virtue for its own sake. You would take away that which is intrinsic and central to the fabric of reality as I have called it forth. You come; you play God. How would you do it?

Oh, yes, Job, I know it's very much in process. It's far from perfect. There are the wicked who prosper and there are the innocent who suffer. Cancer grows on beautiful young bodies and blood clots form, and loved ones are lost and it hurts . . . and it's dark . . . and it's painful. Human existence is vulnerable and it's perilous, and it's open to terror. Yes, Job, I know. Don't you think I know? But what would you do, Job, if you could play 'God for a Day?'"

Job said, "I didn't know. .. I didn't know. I am all focused in my own little internal concerns and issues. I changed my mind. That is, I repent. I take my words back accusing you of injustice. I don't know. I have spoken things I didn't understand. I've tried to bring into manageable terms infinite reality. I... I dissolve."

And that was the point of Job's transformation. His issues never got dealt with. Suddenly he began to think in larger terms with a grander vision, and realized that he had two alternatives: To remain in an embittered cynicism or to 'Trust God in the Darkness.'" Shades of next week.