

## OUR PLACE IN CREATION

READ JOB 38:1-11, 42:1-7 (BROADER CONTEXT: JOB 38-42)

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Pastor Lois and I have been leading our congregation through a whirlwind tour of the book of Job, that I'll finish reflecting on how God spoke to Job from the whirlwind. In the last weeks the entire world has been reeling under the threat of a global pandemic that is impacting our daily lives. We're forced to break free from our addiction to plans and having everything under control. In America, we've been building a tower of Babel of wealth, thinking we are above suffering, but this disease doesn't care.

We are needing endurance, wisdom, and good news. The book of Job gives us a window into God's truth that we can take hold of as believers in the Good News of Jesus.

Just to review, *Job* is the story of a good man who lost everything – his children, his possessions, and his health. At the beginning of the book, Job is accepting of his suffering, but in the long poetic arguments with his friends, Job despairs, defends his innocence, and wishes he could take God to court. Finally, when God's silence has become unbearable, God speaks.

The poetry that masterfully holds God's truth and mystery (ch. 38-41) throws questions questions at Job rather than answering Job's questions. After Job gives a feeble response at the beginning of chapter 40, God continues, until Job is forced to surrender (or so it appears).

What does God say? There's lots of ways to read this. One way is to hear a very angry God. God might be saying: "who are you, Job, to dare question me? Can you make a universe? Then you don't have the right to talk back to me!" In 40:8, God says, "Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified?"

God begins by addressing the creation of the world, setting up limits for the sea – which ancient people saw as a symbol of chaos and disorder. God commands the morning light, the snow and the rain. God made the stars, listing out constellations like Orion and the Bear (big dipper).

Then God goes on to talk about animals: the lion, the mountain goat, the wild ass, the wild ox, the ostrich, horses, and hawks. Each creature holds its own marvel, and clearly, they are not all here to serve human beings.

In the second round of challenges to Job, God names two mythological creatures: a giant Beast called the Behemoth that God made along with Job and the sea monster called Leviathan. God seems to brag about these monsters and doesn't offer much assurance of keeping them under control. Our three-year-old whispered about monsters that live in the shadows until he finally realized that everything makes a shadow including us. I would assure him that there was no need to be afraid of monsters because Jesus was with him.

Is God really a bully? There are other ways to understand God's words. God told Job to "gird his loins like a warrior." Men had to tuck their long robes into their belt in order to be able to run. That sounds like a threat, but maybe God is challenging Job to embrace a kind of fighting spirit. What if God wants o

embolden Job rather than defeat him? Then God's questions aren't meant to shame Job, but to teach him that the "Creator of the world can construct new possibilities where none seem to exist."<sup>1</sup>

Job's response to God also can be interpreted multiple ways. If you hear God as a bully berating Job, then Job is surrendering, and repenting of sin. Job's words, "therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes," (42:6) are much more ambiguous in the original Hebrew. Among the possible translations could be this one: "Therefore I retract [my words] and am comforted about dust and ashes."<sup>2</sup>

Job isn't admitting some horrible sin that his friends accused of. Job now realizes after God's tour through creation that he has nothing more to say. Maybe he's reaching the point of acceptance in his grief process. Maybe he is ready to accept his suffering as part of the river of his life. For those who were at our Ash Wednesday service, we used these words: "remember that you are dust and to dust you will return."

Meanwhile, if God has been acting like a bully, then why does God ultimately restore Job's fortunes? Why is God instead angry with Job's friends in chapter 42, saying that they didn't speak what was right about God as Job did? That seems strange when Job had spent a lot of verses criticizing God.

Maybe it's the way that Job spoke, his refusal to accept injustice and his dogged pursuit of the truth about God, rather than settling for his friend's answers. The genius of the book of Job is its refusal to give simple answers.

In the end, Job prays for God to forgive his friends – a selfless act – and then he receives everything back. Job's change of fortune is a surprise. In a couple of weeks, we will celebrate Jesus' resurrection. Job's story ends on a note of resurrection. Victory out of what seemed like crushing defeat. That's the thought that we need to hold with us in these times.

Now that the pace of our lives is slowed down, can we take the opportunity to listen for the voice of God? While practicing physical distancing, can we take advantage of the outdoors in springtime weather and marvel at God's world and our place in it? Can we both embrace our smallness and the courage to make our lives count? Each of us matters immensely to God, *and* God and God's universe are so much bigger than my life and my needs. That's the paradox.

There may be hard days when emotions run strong. Remember that no feeling lasts forever. It may help to acknowledge what you are experiencing, find one word to name it, and give that to God.

In Romans 8, we find this idea that all of creation is groaning like a mom in labor (v. 22). We feel like we are groaning in these cloudy days of distancing. It's a relief to know that God's Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words, whenever we aren't sure how to pray. Let's allow the pandemic to truly humble us, while also daring to live as image-bearers of God, by claiming our courage, resolve, and willingness to fight for the love of Christ to be revealed.

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<sup>1</sup> Balentine, Samuel. *Job*, (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2006), 634

<sup>2</sup> (Newsom, "The Book of Job," in vol 4 of *New Interpreter's Bible*, 629). See also 2 Samuel 13:39: "And the heart of the king went out, yearning for Absalom; for he was **now consoled over** the death of Amnon." Absalom had murdered his brother Amnon, but after 3 years of mourning, the king David is done mourning. The words in bold are the same as in Job 42:6.