

B Lectionary 29 10.20.24

Job 38:1-7

Focus Statement: The world God created is both beautiful and terrible, and one does not negate the other.

Last week, Job begged for God to show Godself so that Job could argue the case of his innocence. Well, in chapter thirty-eight, God showed up, and Job may well have wished God had stayed absent. One commentator I read wryly remarked, “[These words are] not, in a conventional sense, very comforting. God would probably fail a present-day pastoral care class.”¹ And yet, as we’ll read next week—preview of coming attractions—these words did, inexplicably, provide comfort for Job, pulling him out of his endless cycle of grief and despair and leading him to life again. So, knowing that these words did work, let’s look at what God did here, and why Job might have found comfort in God’s harsh questioning.

Since the bottom dropped out on Job’s world back in chapters one and two, Job’s friends have been, with all the best intentions, trying to make sense of Job’s misfortunes by figuring out what he did wrong to bring about God’s wrath. And actually, in chapter thirty-two a fourth guy showed up, and he too was like, Job this is about you, not God. You must have done something unspeakably horrible to deserve these horrible consequences. In the face of all this pressure, Job remained steadfast, confident in his own innocence. Rightly, I should add. This wasn’t a case of Job thinking more highly of himself than a should. Job really was, as described in the very first verse of the book, a man who “was blameless and

¹ Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, “Commentary on Job 38:1-7 [34-41],” Working Preacher, 21 Oct 2012, <<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-29-2/commentary-on-job-381-7-34-41>>.

upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.”² Fear, remember in the biblical sense of the word. Not fear like horror or terror, but fear like awe or wonder. The sort of fear you feel standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon or staring out into the vastness of the night sky. The kind of fear that makes you wonder at your smallness in comparison to the grandeur of creation.

Let me pause here really quick and point something out about what Job’s actions tell us about what is included in fearing God and turning away from evil. The book of Job shows us that fear of God and turning away from evil does not preclude getting super mad at God for the injustices of the world and telling God as much. In between Job’s friends’ speeches, Job railed at God. We see this in the psalms too, but it’s an important point to reiterate. Getting super mad at God, and telling God about it, is not a sign of a lack of faith and it is not a betrayal of God. The world is big and hard and complex and no one, least of all God, is expecting you to float gamely through it just being happy and contented all the time no matter what happens. If and when stuff like what happened to Job happens to you, and all of us face suffering at various points even if not at the scope to which Job experienced it. Or when you witness the suffering of others, the injustice of the world, it is totally legitimate and even, I think, an act of faith, to express your righteous—and I use the word righteous really intentionally right here. Righteousness being the state of being in right relationship with God—your righteous anger at undeserved suffering. I would go so far as to argue that trite, easy answers like, “God has a plan” or “everything happens for a reason” in the face of real suffering do not honor God because they try to simplify God, to make the assertion that

² Job 1:1

we can somehow come to know or understand God's workings in the world. And God always blows out of any box we try to keep God in.

But anyway, back to Job. After so many chapters of Job requesting a hearing with the Almighty, in chapter thirty-eight, "out of the whirlwind," in classic divine appearance fashion, God showed up.

God showed up and immediately was all, "who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?"³ The word translated as counsel here is usually associated with planning, in this case with the plans of God. Throughout the book, Job had been questioning the order of the world in the face of his suffering, asking if God had taken God's hands off the wheel, so to speak, if disorder could account for Job's suffering. This opening question, and the words that follow, assert that not only does the world operate in an orderly fashion, but God is the author of that order. "Gird up your loins like a man."⁴ This phrase, I have to say, feels especially insensitive. I think it was Mary in Bible chat who described it as God essentially saying to Job, "suck it up, buttercup." Gird up your loins is a reference to soldiers going into battle. In ancient times, men would wear long flowing robes. So before going into battle, soldiers would literally "gird up their loins," meaning they would tie their robes up around their waists, so they wouldn't risk their robes getting tangled around their ankles and hindering their freedom of movement. The phrase took on a colloquial meaning of preparing to face something difficult or challenging. Often in the

³ Job 38:2

⁴ Job 38:3

prophets, when God would call a prophet to some hard task and the prophet would protest, God's response would be that they should "gird up their loins" and do it anyway.

Telling Job to "gird up his loins" is tough love, but it's love, because sometimes, for Job, and for us, what other choice do we have. Sometimes the only way out is through. There's a comedian I like, Taylor Tomlinson, who has a bit about trying to give yourself an adult pep talk. If you look the bit up, I'm going to warn you, I'm going to church edit it here, but anyway. Tomlinson talks about how as a kid "you can shadowbox in the bathroom mirror like, 'You're gonna do it, 'cause you're great and I believe in you.'" But, as an adult, Tomlinson goes on, "you're just leaning in that sink like, 'You're gonna do it. Cause what other choice do you have?'"⁵ I think I've told the story of how I broke my arm the last month of my senior year of seminary, and I went to, the pastoral care professor, who was, ironically, maybe the least warm and fuzzy member of the faculty, because I was really overwhelmed with trying to get through all the work I had left to graduate with only one arm. She started to help me problem solve solutions. I interrupted, I didn't want solutions, I wanted sympathy. She cut me off, "Kjersten, you didn't brush your own hair this morning, you're not really in a position to negotiate whether or not you need help here, are you?" It was not warm and fuzzy, it made me super angry, I'll admit, and I stormed out of her office hot to trot about her lack of compassion. And, she was right. I needed help, I needed to suck it up and deal. Breaking my arm wasn't my fault, the workload wasn't my fault, the pain wasn't my fault, but neither were any of those things in my control. I walked straight out of her office, down the street, and into a hair salon that took walk-ins, so I could get my

⁵ Taylor Tomlinson, Quarter-life Crisis, (2020; Netflix).

hair cropped short enough that I could brush it on my own and regain control of at least that one tiny aspect of my life. Because, as Tomlinson so eloquently said, what other choice did I have.

So God said to Job, “suck it up,” but then God took Job on this incredible tour of the cosmos, beginning with the formation of the very foundations of the earth, the birth of the seas, the magnificence of so many wild and fierce creatures, lions, mountain goats, deer, wild donkeys, ostriches, and eagles, even primordial chaos monsters like Behemoth and the Leviathan, all created by and formed with God’s Almighty Hand. By answering Job with more questions, questions describing the scope and vastness and wonder of the universe, the book of Job challenges us to hold in tension two seemingly contradictory truths, that the world is orderly, and that tragedy doesn’t always have a reason. Says one commentary I read, “the realities of Job and God collide in this section, and they are both true.”⁶ And another commentary, “The book holds in tension the greatest wonders and the most troubling questions, never tying it up with a neat little bow to be more palatable to the likes of us.”⁷ This is an unsatisfying ending, one hundred percent. We want there to be a reason, we want the good guy to win in the end. Job doesn’t give us that. But that can also be a relief, to recognize that victims of tragedy are not to blame for misfortune. Sometimes bad things happen and there is no good reason. Job frees us from the prison of trying to make

⁶ Karla Suomala, “Commentary on Job 38:1-7 [34-41],” Working Preacher, 18 Oct 2015, <<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-29-2/commentary-on-job-381-7-34-41-3>>.

⁷ Esther J. Hamori, “Commentary on Job 38:1-7 [34-41],” Working Preacher, 20 Oct 2024, <<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-29-2/commentary-on-job-381-7-34-41-7>>.

sense of everything, allowing us to “live freely in a world full of heartbreaking suffering and heart-stopping beauty, and to do so in a way that reflects God’s own care for the world.”⁸

I’ve gotten into the pattern in this time in Job of ending with the words of someone else that I find beautiful and pertinent. I’m going to keep with the pattern, because what we’ve been talking about reminds me of theologian Frederick Buechner’s definition of grace.

Grace, writes Buechner, “is something you can never get but can only be given... A good sleep is grace and so are good dreams. Most tears are grace. The smell of rain is grace. Somebody loving you is grace. Loving somebody is grace. Have you ever tried to love somebody?

The grace of God means something like: "Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are, because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you."⁹ Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁸ Schifferdecker

⁹ Frederick Buechner, “Grace,” *Wishful Thinking*, Harper and Row Publishers: New York, 1973, p. 33.