

Job 38:1-7, 34-41  
Hebrews 5:1-10

21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
October 17, 2021

## **A Divine Encounter**

### *Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson*

While the three friends (and Elihu) argued that the solution to Job's suffering was found in repentance, Job believed he was innocent and that the answer would come in a meeting with God. In our Old Testament Lesson today he finally gets what he wanted—an audience with God. However, the meeting does not go as Job had anticipated. Listen to these words from Job 38:1-7 and 34-41...

### *Introduction to the Epistle Lesson*

While Jesus is “the great high priest,” there are others who are called by God to priestly service. They can identify with people by virtue of their own weaknesses. Jesus learned obedience through suffering and became the source of our salvation. Listen to these words from Hebrews 5:1-10...

### *Sermon*

The prominent Jewish Rabbi, Harold Kushner, had a three-year-old son, Aaron, diagnosed with the premature aging disease Progeria that would prevent him from living beyond his early teens. Naturally, the father wondered why. A few years following his son's diagnosis, Kushner wrote a book about the questions, doubts, and fears that arise when such a tragedy strikes. You may have heard of it: *When Bad Things Happened to Good People* (1981).

In his book, *Job, Led by Suffering to the Heart of God*, Eugene Peterson says of Job's friends:

There is more to the book of Job than Job. There are Job's friends. The moment we find ourselves in trouble of any kind—sick in the hospital, bereaved by a friend's death, dismissed from a job or relationship, depressed or bewildered—people start showing up telling us exactly what is wrong with us and what we must do to get better. Sufferers attract fixers the way road-kills attract vultures. At first we are impressed that they bother with us and amazed at their facility with answers. They know so much! How did they get to be such experts in living?

Furthermore, these people use the Bible frequently and loosely. They are full of spiritual diagnosis and prescription. It sounds so pious. But then we may wonder why, after they've given their advice, we feel worse rather than better.

The book of Job is not only a witness to the dignity of suffering and God's presence in our suffering, but it is also our main biblical protest against a religion that has been reduced to explanations, formulas, and easy answers.

You may have seen the movie *Shadowlands*, inspired by the book, *A Grief Observed*, by C. S. Lewis. In the book he candidly tells of his grief and doubts in the wake of the death of his wife, Joy, to cancer following four years of being happily married. There is even anger and bewilderment toward God. Some of the Christian writer's admirers found it troubling; being disinclined to believe that C. S. Lewis could be so close to despair. Ultimately, Lewis came to a redefinition of his own characterization of God: knowing gratitude for having received the gift of a true love.

After Job's friends have given him all their advice, out of the whirlwind, God addresses Job. This whirlwind is a mighty signal of a theophany—God's immediate appearing in the midst of human life. God instructs Job to "Gird up your loins." "Tighten your clothing." For he is about to engage in combat. This conversation that Job has longed for is not going to be easy. Instead of Job confronting God, God confronts Job.

It was not unusual in the Bible for human beings in conversation with God to find it no easy task. As with Isaiah, who said,

Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips. (6:5)

And in our Old Testament Lesson Job is virtually silenced by God's withering interrogation:

Who are *you*?  
Where were *you*?  
What do *you* know?  
Stand up and answer.

The questions thunder across the earth, unanswerable, intimidating, leaving room for nothing but silence.

Job has poured out his heart to God, shaking his fist toward heaven, defending his integrity and innocence, challenging the pious beliefs of his friends. What reason can there be for his suffering—one blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil? (Job 1:1b) But Job has obscured the counsel of God by speaking of God's actions and purposes with inadequate knowledge.

Remember, Job and his wife had seven sons and three daughters. He had many servants. He had 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, 500 female donkeys. But alas, Job lost children, servants, and animals. And in his great sorrow, before God he said:

Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there;  
the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. (1:21)

Next Job lost his health, suffering loathsome boils and painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head. His wife urged him to curse God and die. But he would not (2:1-9).

It's not difficult for us to think of examples of innocent suffering. There are the children at Thornwell Home in Clinton and Calvary Home in Anderson, many of whom have suffered from abuse of various kinds.

In his book, *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation*, Jonathan Kozol stares into the deep pain and suffering of impoverished children living in the South Bronx of New York City. There's drug abuse, violence, hunger. Bitter realities with no easy solutions.

Many have asked how six million Jews could die under the ruthless Nazi regime of Adolph Hitler and his collaborators. During the Holocaust, from 1941 to 1945 there were an additional five million others put to death, including ethnic Poles, Jehovah's Witnesses, the physically and mentally disabled, homosexuals, and others, making the total some eleven million human beings.

In his *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, Walter Brueggemann notes that Job is innocent, yet suffers; obedient, yet suffers. His friends can only imagine that suffering is rooted in sin. Job wants to know what charges are to be made against him. In chapter 27 he protests:

Far be it from me to say that you are right; until I die I will not put away my integrity from me. I hold fast my righteousness, and will not let it go; my heart does not reproach me for any of my days. (27:5-6)

In our lesson from Job 38 we are taken on a journey of creation. When the foundations of the earth were laid, its measurements determined. When the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy. Can *we* send forth lightning? Can *we* number the clouds or tilt the waterskins of heaven? Can *we* provide for the hunger of the young lions or the ravens?

Thus are we put face to face with unfathomable wisdom and power. Some arrogantly talk like they have the answer to creation completely wrapped up in “The Big Bang” theory.

And many people today are impatient with all about life and the universe that we cannot understand and manage. With mystery and transcendence. They want a predictable, domesticated God. But that, God refuses to be. So one of the lessons we can take from Job is that faith involves mystery, and that is okay. In place of trying to explain innocent suffering and things we cannot understand, let us accept that there is much in being a human being that is beyond us. The Apostle Paul said, “For now we see through a glass darkly...now I know in part.” (I Cor. 12:12)

Presbyterian minister Randolph Harris says that the joyful hymn that we sang this morning: “This Is My Father’s World,” encourages trust and delight in the wonder and goodness of God’s creation. But it is also a reminder that it is God’s world, not ours. And we didn’t create the world. God did. And God calls us to be good stewards of his creation. Job’s sufferings are part of a vast scheme of things which is far beyond the mind of mortal man to comprehend.

Our Epistle lesson from Hebrews 5 says that we have a great high priest, Jesus, the Son, begotten of the Father, who learned obedience *through what he suffered*, and having been made perfect, he not only initiated forgiveness, but became the source of eternal salvation for all who follow him.

Job has continually underestimated God. There *is* logic and order in the creation and in the Creator, as biblical wisdom has maintained. Yet the logic and order is of a higher realm than Job has ever imagined. And so the issue is no longer seen to be, “Why do I and other godly people suffer?” Rather the issue is, “How do I find peace with God in the midst of my suffering?”

And the answer: “Trust God and you will be at peace.” Accept the element of mystery about things that are beyond us, and trust that God will take care of that which we do not understand.

In verses 8-11 of Job 38 God is presented as a midwife assisting the sea as it “bursts from the womb” and wrapping it in “a swaddling band” of the clouds and the darkness. According to Mark Throntreit, professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, we have here a picture of nurture, care, and restraint in the service of protection.

In his conversation with God, Job is not pampered with easy answers, but he is challenged to be born again from the chaos in which he has lived. And in the end, Job is converted from a “religion of the head,” to a “religion of the heart.” From a religion of knowing, to a religion of trusting. And that trust in God will make it unnecessary to understand all the “hows” and “whys” of God’s providence. And that is our challenge today—to trust God and believe that he will give us peace in the midst of our own pain. In the midst of a viral pandemic. In the midst of our own uncertainties—uncertainties about our health, our family members, our church, our country, and our world.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.