



From the Whirlwind



A Sermon By
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The Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost
Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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Job 38:1-7

Psalm 104:1-9, 25, 37b

Hebrew 5:1-10

Mark 10:35-45

In the Hebrew Bible, God is depicted as a person who acts in history. God walks in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve. God sends a flood to destroy the evildoers of Noah's generation. God converses with Abraham. God parts the waters of the Red Sea for the escaping Hebrew slaves. God sends the Assyrians and the Babylonians to destroy the nations of Israel and Judah as punishment for their sinfulness. Moreover, God is a moral agent. Everything God does is just and righteous. And the common belief of the people was that, people who acted like God, in a just and righteous way, were rewarded. Conversely, wicked people were punished. This system of justice, known as retributive justice, was a belief held by many of our ancestors in the faith. In fact, faithful people have held this understanding throughout a large part of human history.

But the Book of Job puts these assumptions about God and prevailing human beliefs about how the world works to the test. The story of Job is a story of unwarranted suffering. In the beginning of the book, Job is described as "a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil." Under the system of retributive justice, Job should be rewarded for his righteousness. However, that does not happen. In fact, Job's life is turned upside down. At the beginning of the story, Job was the center of his universe, sitting in judgment at the city gate, surrounded by family and possessions and admired by everyone. By chapter 38, where we find ourselves today in the story, Job has lost it all.

Trouble after trouble comes to Job. Meanwhile, his friends who continue to hold to the doctrine of retributive justice believe that because Job suffers, he must have done something to deserve it. Job himself knows that this isn't true. His world has descended into chaos, but he still holds to his integrity and calls on God for some answers. Why God? Why would you allow this to happen? Don't you care? Why are you letting me suffer? If you are a just God, make this better. Job challenges the very justice of God in ruling the universe and then waits upon God to answer this challenge.

Today in chapter 38, God answers Job. God's response to Job is actually a series of questions. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Who laid the cornerstone of the earth when the morning stars sang together?" God is strikingly unconcerned with the discussion of retributive justice. God doesn't comment on that understanding. What God does is to turn the conversation in another direction, reminding Job, that God is the Lord of heaven and earth, of all that is and will be.

To some, this dialogue may feel as if God is putting Job in his place. The text seems to say, I am God and you are not. Look at all I have done in this world. You are but a blip in time and consciousness so buck up and deal with your problems. This train of thought is a common reading of this text, but I don't think it is a complete reading of the text. In fact, I would say that is a misreading of God's response. For me, the take away from this discourse is that God shows up for us in our need. God is there for us. In the depths of our pain and despair, God speaks. God responds to Job, assuring him that he is not abandoned in his suffering as Job had feared.

God does not dismiss Job, but rather seeks to meet Job where he is and then reorients Job within a larger awareness of God's good creation. God's answer breaks open Job's world and expands his vision. As the passage continues past our assigned reading, God speaks of freedom and grace rather than reward and

retribution. God meets Job in the midst of his pain, in the middle of his doubts, at the core of his fear. God met Job where he was. The author of the universe, the one who set the corner stone of the earth when the morning stars sang together, responded to Job in his suffering. This God, cares about Job and his pain and wants to bring Job through his suffering to the beauty that lies on the other side.

When we suffer, when our hearts break, and we feel like God has abandoned us, this text reminds us how far from the truth that is. God has not abandoned us and never will. God has promised to meet us in the depths of our suffering and to bring us through to the other side.

God doesn't offer Job any explanation for his suffering. God doesn't affirm the lens of retributive justice through which Job sees the world. In fact, as the text continues, God seems to dismiss the idea that God orders the world so that everyone receives reward or punishment proportionate with his or her behavior. What God does instead is to meet Job in his suffering and remind him that he is not alone in his pain. God who created the depths of the earth, cares about him. Sometimes bad things happen just because they happen. Suffering is a part of life this side of paradise. But that doesn't mean that God wants us to suffer. In fact, when we suffer, God who loves us suffers with us.

So take your concerns to God. Like Job, question God. Bring your suffering, your pain before the Almighty and see what happens. The God who answered Job from the whirlwind is the same God who came to us in Jesus and offered himself as a servant, giving his life to us and for us. God cares about us. God cares about you. And if and when you feel distant from God, God still cares about you. Bring your questions to God. Bring your anger, your suffering, your concerns. I can't promise that you'll receive a response from the whirlwind like Job, but I trust that the God who loved creation into existence will meet you where you are in some form or fashion because that is who God is. That is what God does time and time again. Amen.