

Christ Church + Washington Parish  
The Rev. Cara Spaccarelli  
October 21, 2018; Job 38:1-7  
How God answers the unanswerable  
Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost, Year B<sup>1</sup>

We have not been preaching through Job the last few weeks, so I feel like I need to catch you a bit up. His story may be pretty familiar to you. Job is a book in the Old Testament that tells the story of one character, Job, unlike some stories in Scripture; it doesn't claim any historic validity. There once was a man named Job. Most believe it was written to address the age-old dilemma – Why do good people suffer in this world? More specifically than that, it responds to a theological premise present in Scripture – God rewards the good and punishes the bad. So if you are suffering, you must have done something wrong.

So we start with good and faithful Job. God is talking to Satan – this is an early appearance for Satan and he doesn't have all the evil baggage yet. He is more an adversary – the cross-examining attorney persay. God tells Satan, look at my guy Job, he's a great guy. He is so faithful to me. Of course, he's faithful Satan responds, you've given him all this good stuff – a bunch of kids, a good wife, lots of livestock and land, good health – if you take all that away, he will definitely turn against you. Give it a go, God responds. It's not long then that Job is sitting in a pile of dust covered in sores having lost all of his children and all of his livestock. He is suffering. He cries out to God, Why? Why? I'm a good man. His friends and his wife beg to differ – you must have done something wrong Job or this wouldn't have happened. Figure it out

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<sup>1</sup> *Disclaimer: I do not read my sermons so actual wording of sermon may be different when preached. Lots of grace would be appreciated for grammatical errors as I both write for the ear and spend time on delivery rather than doing a thorough editing.*

and repent. Say you're sorry. Accept that it's your fault. Job refuses to accept this. He knows he hasn't done anything wrong, anything really wrong, and God could not be punishing him, and if he was, God wasn't justified in doing so. He declares his innocence over and over again. He wants to confront God and prove his case. They go around and around like this for 38 chapters. That's where we find Job this morning – sitting in the dirt, covered in oozing sores, surrounded by his so-called friends, wanting only to confront God and defend himself against this unjust punishment.

Today we hear God's response. Well, the first seven verses of God's response. It goes on longer. Much longer. A warm and fuzzy God we do not see. "Why do you talk without knowing what you're talking about? Pull yourself together, Job!" (The Message Translation) What follows is not a response to Job's questions. God does not defend himself or let Job defend himself; God does not respond with the courtroom drama that Job wants to clear his name. God also doesn't respond to the questions swirling around Job and his friends about what all this suffering means.

Instead God responds with 60 questions – 60 questions that are rhetorical in nature, emphasizing God’s power as creator and the beauty and majesty of creation. You get a sense of it here in the passage, but it goes on and on . . . ‘Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place . . . ‘Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Do you observe the calving of the deer? . . . ‘what is the way to the abode of light and where does darkness reside? If you were to listen to it in its entirety, it would run for 8 minutes. 8 minutes of God’s knowledge and power over the beauty and majesty of creation. Job’s relatively brief response to God’s speech is humble – you are God, I am not. I am your servant.

If you are thinking, well God just put Job in check – you are not be the first to think that. God is God. You are not. Stop trying to figure it out. God does settle the disagreement between Job and his friends, telling his friends that they were wrong this whole time and Job was right. Right in that Job did not think he had done anything wrong to warrant this. But other than that, God’s speech makes Job recognize that even as a righteous man, he cannot know why he suffers and the wicked prosper. He simply is not God. Job remains faithful.

But is this speech really what convinces Job, lying in the dust, covered in sores, having lost everything in his life that means anything to him, to remain faithful?

If I was Job, and I was listening to what God was saying, I'd be pretty mad that God responded this way. God never recognizes Job's suffering. God never recognizes the points Job was trying to make. God never answers his questions. It is like God hasn't even been listening. If this is God, Creator Extraordinaire but lacking in some basic people skills, I think I might walk away. Why would I keep serving this God? Compassionate, not so much. Powerful, yes, but what does it matter if he doesn't use his power in my life. God certainly does not convince me with his passionate speech to stay faithful.

I'd suggest, and I'm not alone in this either, that it isn't what God says that convinces Job of anything. It's that God talks at all. To him. Job responds to God – “my ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you.” In simpler words, “I once lived by rumors of you; now I have experienced you firsthand.” (The Message) Job is overwhelmed with the majesty of God not because of his track record in creation, but because he has a direct experience of God. In response, as the theologian Frederick Buechner puts it, “all possible questions melted like mist, and all possible explanations withered like grass, and all the bad times of his life together with all the good times were so caught up into the fathomless life of this God.”

The biblical scholar Martin Buber reflects along the same lines. “. . .What God says to [Job] does not answer the charge; it does not even touch upon it. The true answer that Job receives is God's appearance only, only this, that distance turns into nearness, that 'his eye sees him,' that he knows Him again. Nothing is explained, nothing adjusted; wrong has not become right, nor cruelty kindness. Nothing has happened but that man again hears God's address.”

**The answer to Job's dilemma is found in religious experience, not in theological speculation. This is Job's mystical experience.**

I avoid reading mystics myself. It's not that I don't value their experience; it's that I find words inadequate in describing a mystical experience and meaning is so individual. I say that because I'm about to talk about the mystical experience and I do so with hesitation. It is also something that I can't tell you how to make happen or point it out to you in your own life. We can't have a retreat designed to provide mystical experiences. There are only a handful described in the Bible – this, the Transfiguration, probably a few more. Mystical experiences happen when you are filled with a sense of the transcendent in the present; it can be visceral or emotional or intellectual or more often a mix of it all. It takes you outside yourself, yet you are still yourself. You sense things that you don't normally sense – connections between people, between the divine and you. You can call that transcendent our cosmic connection, the power larger than ourselves, the creator, or in Christianity, God. The mystical experience is the immanent sense of the transcendent. I've experienced it alone and in gatherings of people; I've experienced it singing a beloved hymn in a church and walking alone in the woods; I've experienced it in 30 second snippets of prayer or in much more extensive meditation times. I cannot make it happen. I can simply recognize it when it does. Each experience of the transcendent in the moment makes it easier to converse and orient myself towards God in the far more frequent ordinary time, because I have a more intuitive sense of what I'm looking towards and conversing with.

The immanent experience of the transcendent does not answer Job's questions or explain his suffering, but it frees him from being paralyzed by the struggle of it. God shows up; God that **exists in and beyond** the suffering. God becomes more than a rumor to Job, more than something he has heard about and believes in, but someone he has seen, felt, heard firsthand. This is the answer that is not an answer; instead it lets Job live with the questions, the unknowing, and still feel the peace of God who shows up, is here and is holding it – the brokenness of life, alongside the wonder and joy, holding the pain – holding it all together, because God knows it all, God knows creation, better than us.

I can't tell you how to have a mystical moment, but I can encourage you to be open to one. For the mystical – the times of experiencing the divine in the moment - can help us to orient ourselves to God in the ordinary times, with whatever pains or joys we carry within us.