

“Finding Comfort without Answers”

Job 38:1-11, 31-33 - Rev. Clinton G. Roberts - First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest, IL - June 20, 2021

When I was a boy, my father used to take me out at night to look at the stars. Living near downtown Philadelphia, there weren't an awful lot of them to see. But the Big Dipper was there, and Orion's Belt, and on very clear nights, we could see the Pleiades—the Seven Sisters, as well.

I can still remember summer nights lying on my back with our family in some high meadow in the Berkshires, marveling at the Milky Way and watching for shooting stars, as the crickets sang and the fireflies flickered. One Christmas morning (I'm not sure which) I opened a large box with my name on in beneath the tree. It was a telescope—a Tasco Telescope! I was overjoyed. That very night, Dad showed me the moons of Jupiter.

Yes—I was fortunate enough to grow up in a very loving if imperfect family, where God's grace was needed, asked for and received. And every time we say, “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done...” aren't we asking the same thing for every little boy and girl in the world?

The universe we have the privilege of observing is filled with goodness, beauty and light. The gift of living brings with it the opportunity to explore its meaning and splendor, and to know its Maker, as God chooses to be known.

But the world we inhabit is also filled with darkness, with evil alongside the good, with unspeakable suffering, with the effects of sin, and with the inevitability of death. Maybe it's true that we cannot have the one without the other, as some philosophers say. But when our Bibles assert that the Maker of heaven and earth is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love;” or that “God is love;” or that “every perfect gift comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change,” then it does become difficult, does it not sometimes, to reconcile our beliefs about God with our experience of living?

Think of how early on children gain an understanding of fairness. “That's not fair, Daddy! She got a bigger scoop than I did!” Is it five years old? Or four?

No—we learn at a very early age that life isn't fair. And that makes us angry. Sometimes the lesson is easy. Other times—the lessons are horrifyingly hard.

Sooner or later, the world we live in will present us personally with the fundamental need to ask, “Why?” “Why, God?” “Why do the little ones suffer? Why do good people perish and bad people prosper? Why does an altogether righteous and merciful, and all-knowing and all-powerful God allow Evil and underserved suffering to persist upon earth?” Is it that way in heaven? Isn’t it God’s job to police the earth? To punish the evil and reward the good? To protect the innocent? To make things right?

This is the question of Theodicy. It is Job’s question. And it is our question, too.

The Book of Job is a literary masterpiece dating back at least to the 7th Century BC. Its Hebrew is among the most challenging to translate in the Bible, containing more “hapax legomenons,” words that occur nowhere else in Scripture, than any other book of the Old Testament. Its content and imagery point to an origin outside of Israel, probably in Mesopotamia, where the exiled prophet Ezekiel, living in the 6th Century BC, mentions Job by name.

In the Book itself, which is 42 chapters long, we are told that Job is a righteous, faithful, and God-fearing man who is blessed with 3 daughters and 7 sons, 3000 camels and 7000 sheep, and vast estates which make him the richest man in the land of Uz. And each day he would make sacrifice and pray to God for his children.

The story begins in heaven, where God says, “Consider my servant Job. There is no one like him—a blameless and upright man who turns away from evil.” But Satan, whose name means “Adversary” is present also in the heavenly court and Satan replies, “Does Job fear God for nothing? Take away what he has, and he will curse you to your face.” God says, “Very well.” God allows Satan to take away everything Job possesses, including the calamitous death of all his children. This all happens in the space of one day. Upon hearing the news, Job tears his fine robe apart, shaves his head and falls to the ground in worship. “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away,” he says. “Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

Satan has failed to destroy Job’s faith. But Satan isn’t done yet. “Skin for skin!” he says to God. “Let me have his body, and he will curse you to your face.” God says, “Very well.” So Satan visits Job with horrible, loathsome sores all over his body, and now even his wife says, “Will you persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.” But Job does not curse God. After seven days and nights of silence attended by his friends, Job opens his mouth and curses the day he was conceived. It is raw and painful stuff, and over the next 35 chapters, we are given the most powerful exploration of the problem of evil that has ever been written in any language or at any time. The Book of Job equals Homer’s “Iliad” in power and beauty, surpassing even John Milton’s “Paradise Lost” in its theological depth.

At its heart lies Job's question, "Why?" His three friends Bildad, Eliphaz and Zophar all argue that Job must have done something wrong to have this all happen to him. But Job will have none of that. He knows that he is blameless. And more importantly—so do we.

What's really on trial here is the theology of Divine Retribution, which teaches that goodness will be rewarded and evil will be punished on earth. But when we carefully consider our human condition—our power and politics, our wealth and our poverty, our health and our afflictions, we see that life doesn't really work out that way. Job knows this better than anyone, and he won't settle for anything less than a direct explanation from God. He even wishes he could put God himself on trial—as if there were a higher Power to appeal to arbitrate justice. Over the next 35 chapters, Job fiercely debates his friends' theology, he rants and he wails at God. But he never curses God. Job's belief in God remains steadfast. And after 35th chapters, God shows up in person to respond to Job's complaint: not in a still, small voice like Elijah—but in the eye of the storm. "Who is this who darkens counsel without knowledge? Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" It is God now who is questioning Job, and the questions keep coming over the next four chapters, as God leads Job through the wonders of Creation itself. In doing so, God offers Job a deeper perspective: and a higher point-of view.

Some people see this as the ultimate put-down. But I ask you, what would be the point? In the face of all our sin and suffering, does God really want to put us down? Does God expect us to cower before him? To suffer in silence when confronted with injustice? To say nothing at all?

The answer is and must be, "No."

God doesn't give Job an answer to his "Why?" But God does offer Job his Presence, coming to be with him in the midst of his suffering, offering Job a one-to-one relationship, and giving Job a glimpse of Creation from God's point-of-view. Such understanding is too wonderful for Job—and for us. But Job is comforted by God's presence. He repents of his anger and accepts his condition. "I know you can do all things," he says to God. "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see you." That is grace. "I see you!" And for Job—that is enough.

Today is Father's Day, and my question for you is, "How do you see God?" Do you see God as the ultimate Policeman whose job is to enforce, protect and to punish evil? Or do you see God as Jesus did, as our Father in heaven (and Mother, too, if you are paying attention to Scripture). Did our parents try to protect and discipline us as children? Of course they did—if they loved us. Were they always successful? Life has a way of interfering with that. As parents, our ability to protect our loved ones is limited. We are not in control. And if our children are going to grow into adulthood, they must learn the hard way to discipline themselves.

No—in the end, all we can really do is to cherish our children in every way we can, to offer them our presence, our attention, our commitment and our love. And you know what? That is what they need most from us. Now and always. Not our answers. Just ourselves.

Jesus used the story of the lost son to teach us about the character of God. God seeks us and comes to us in our sin and in our suffering. God runs to embrace us at the crossroads of life, and gives us what we don't deserve and cannot achieve. God loves us better than any parent on earth. And if we don't find the answer for our "Why?" God answers us still with "I am with you—always." "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you." And as the father comforted both his sons in the story, God loves us when we're faithful and faithless alike.

In our Old Testament reading for today, God visited Job in his affliction, and it was enough.

In the New Testament, God so loved the world in our affliction, he came to us in the person of his Son that we all might become sons and daughters of God. What better way to give thanks for that, than to offer ourselves in the same way to our own sons and daughters? Our presence, our comfort, our attention--our prayers? What if we undertook to love every child of God, the whole world over, as God in Christ loves us?

Now that would be quite an answer, wouldn't it?

An answer the whole world is dying to see.

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