
Whirlwind Wisdom

Job 38:1-7, 34-41

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, October 21, 2018,
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

In a recent New York Times essay, Jonathan Merritt posits that “it’s getting harder to talk about God.” He writes that even though more than 70 percent of Americans identify as Christian, many aren’t comfortable with speaking about faith. He notes that there’s a range of reasons why people are fleeing God-talk, including the belief that “these types of conversations create tension or arguments (28 percent); others feel put off by how religion has been politicized (17 percent); others still report not wanting to appear religious (7 percent), sound weird (6 percent) or seem extremist (5 percent).” But this morning, this is exactly what I want to do—speak of God.

This is a daunting task, a humble homiletical moment for a human being. What can be said of an unspeakable God? An old-time Black preacher, as described by Harlem Renaissance genius James Weldon Johnson, in *God’s Trombones*, approached the preaching moment and said, “Brothers and sisters, this morning – I intend to explain the unexplainable – find out the undefinable – ponder over the imponderable – and unscrew the inscrutable.” So in this tradition, let me speak of the unspeakable – God.

“Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind...” Out of the tempest, out of the storm. Once again, God comes in unexpected forms, reminding us that God is untamable and unpredictable. We can plan our routes in life all we want but there are things out of our control, including the responses of God. Who would have thought that God would sing a tempest tune to Job? But that’s exactly what we have. Wisdom coming out of a whirlwind. Sometimes it takes a whirlwind to get our attention. A still small voice will not always do. Soft, quiet, and contemplative, are not the only ways God moves. God can be loud and raucous and celebratory and whirl a wind of wisdom that we never expected because God is untamable. God doesn’t come the way we want God to come; God comes how and when God wants to come! God may come in a whirlwind, a tempest, to get Job’s attention after all of the talking he and his friends do. This is a divinity whom we do not master even though we hand out master of divinity degrees at the Divinity school; this is a divinity whom we should allow to master us! And God gives Job a master class in what it means to be divinity—“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?”

What Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says about God in the Psalms is also true in Job: God acts in ways that systematic theology doesn’t allow. That is because God is free and wild and beautiful and untamable. Even with your history of so-called wild fraternity parties, we are tame in comparison to God. We like easy answers and Job and his friends have been operating out of their simple, traditional mentality, thinking that obedience leads to blessing and disobedience leads to punishment, thinking that the spiritual life is that clear and easy to understand. But God cannot be tamed or tied down to our tiny theological perspectives. Job’s experience of suffering is an example of how wild, the ride of life can be.

But when God speaks, we also see how wild God can be. God not only names how God nurtures the order of creation but names how God nurtures the chaos of creation as well. God is also present “where the wild things are” (Maurice Sendak). God spends a lot of time talking about untamed creatures – lions, mountain goats, deer, wild donkeys and oxen, ostriches, eagles, and even two primordial chaos monsters, Behemoth and Leviathan. God is wild and beautiful and free, not an orderly homemaker but a chaotic holy divinity that refuses to be controlled or tamed, even by our demands or questions or suffering. God basically asks Job, “Who are you to be questioning

me?” for God is on a whole other plane—meteorological, cosmological, celestial, and terrestrial—out of human control.

And we want to be in control—control our lives, control our spouses, control our bosses, and then there are the helicopter parents or the Blackhawk parents or the snowplow parents who want to help and clear the path for their college-aged children who have left home, parents who unknowingly want to control their children and their decisions, control their futures, and even control God and God’s way. We so badly want to be in control and have a really nice impotent God who genuflects toward us, drinks Starbucks every day, wears Duke blue, drives hybrid cars, so we can fully understand the mystery of divinity. We so often want, even subconsciously, a domesticated divinity, a God who fits into our constructs, a God who will answer to us! Job was like this, which is why he says, “let the Almighty answer me!” (31:35). This is why God answers out of a whirlwind—to wake Job up, to remind him that God isn’t an automaton, but God is free to be who God will be. God is free, though we are often enslaved.

This points to the fact that God is not only untamable; God is incommensurable. There’s the incomprehensibility of our lived reality of suffering and traditional explanations of it as with Job, but there’s also the incommensurability of divinity with humanity. Earlier, Job raises the question, “Where then does wisdom come from? And where is the place of understanding? It is hidden from the eyes of all living and concealed from the birds of the air.... ‘God understands the way to it, and he knows its place...’” (28:20-23). It takes time, but Job eventually sees that human wisdom can’t penetrate the mystery of creation that only God knows. God is beyond human explanation or challenge.

Even in God’s speech, it seems as if God doesn’t really pay attention to Job’s demands and shows no interest in his troubles. As Walter Brueggemann comments, “Job is, in fact, a profound irrelevance in the large vista of [God’s] rule.” Job is concerned with his suffering and God is raising rhetorical questions like “who shut in the seas with doors when it burst out from the womb? ...have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place...?” (38:8,12) Job uses the rhetoric of the courtroom throughout his speeches and God uses the rhetoric of creation. They are speaking two different languages and almost speaking past each other. Job wants God to answer to him—“Let the Almighty answer me!”(31:35) but God flips the script and tells him, “Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me.” God sets the rules of engagement and signals that life and the world is on his terms. “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements -- surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it?...‘Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, so that a flood of waters may cover you?

Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go and say to you, ‘Here we are?’” God doesn’t provide answers to Job’s questions. God raises more questions and the topics are beyond an anthropological level! And that is the point—God is beyond full human understanding. According to Old Testament scholar, Carol Newsom, God’s questions are a straightforward way of showing, that “God is God, and Job is not.” The world and God are so much bigger than us. Notice that in this final section of the Book of Job, God speaks twice and Job speaks twice but God’s speech is disproportionate to Job’s. God dominates their interaction, which is quite different from Job’s plethora of words in his first dispute with his three friends. With his friends, he had lots to say but in the presence of God, Job demonstrates an inability to defend his case. So often, we have so much to say of great human importance. Our opinions matter so much. But in the face of God, Job has very little to say and says, “I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth” (40:4) That is good advice—I lay my hand on my mouth— when we recognize that God is incommensurable. And look at how the book of Job ends to solidify this point. The very last line is “And Job died, old and full of days.” (42:17). We are finite. We die, old perhaps, and most definitely, full of it. But God lives on beyond Job because God is not us.

Untamable, incommensurable, yet mysteriously, God is still relatable. God doesn't shy away from Job and remain in the void of silence at a distance. For sure, God comes out on his own terms but God chooses to break the silence, comes near, and engages Job. God responds with different questions from Job's, but God chooses to be in conversation, to be in relationship, nonetheless. The questions are rhetorical and even "cloyingly sarcastic" (James Kugel) at times yet God relates to Job and is open to Job. Despite the apparent talking-past-each-other, they are somehow still connected to each other.

If God didn't want to relate to Job or to us, God didn't have to respond. But "the Lord answered Job..." The Lord spoke. God speaks here and from the very beginning in Genesis. Speech is a primary way God relates to creation. God speaks to us and we speak as a sign of what it means to be made in God's image. This mutual speaking is key to the relatability of God. Like Job, God speaks but God does so out of the whirlwind, the tempest, the storm, through poetry and not mere prose. God lifts a hymn in a delicate situation of great hurt. God sings out of the storm, revealing how beauty can emerge from burdens, how whirlwinds can lead us to amazing wonder and push us beyond linguistic or rhetorical limits toward a surplus of song, a musical bursting out of oratorical seams, toward the edges of grace and possibility. God's speech is beautiful covering the vast springs of the seas to the morning stars to the storehouses of snow to torrents of rain to the prey for the lion or raven to mountain goats to the wild ox, ostrich wings flapping wildly, horses mane, locust leaps, soaring hawks, mounting eagles. God's poetry of creation reveals God's "will to adorn" (Zora Neal Hurston), even us with beauty.

God doesn't give Job a typical answer, doesn't try to explain his suffering, doesn't even contradict Job's accusations. Rather, God speaks beauty, adorns his language, adorns creation and paints words dressed in glory and awe to transcend the 'isness' of reality with the 'oughtness' of life. God paints a picture of beauty on the canvass of Job's portrait of suffering. To use the words of the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, "out of chaos, hope." Out of the whirlwind, out of the storm, hope comes. Beauty speaks.

Just the other day, Th.D. student Peace Lee told me this story by anthropologist Joan Halifax. A geologist's special area of research was the study of beaches. He was interviewed during a massive hurricane that was slamming into the Outer Banks of NC. The geologist told the journalist he was excited to get to the beach as quickly as he could. When the journalist asked him what he thought he would find out there. The geologist simply said, "there will probably be a new beach." A new beach, a new coastline, a new hope, a new creation out of the whirlwind of a storm.

There is suffering, there is terror, but there is also beauty in the world that God wants us to relate to. Divine and human beauty. God's poetic words, God's hymn to Job, reflects another beautiful Hymn that saved the world.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

*who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—*

*even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2)*

God speaks a human word in Christ to relate to us at the point of our human need. In Christ, we see suffering and beauty meet. In the word of Christ, God breaks the boundaries of beauty to include the grotesque as part of the glory of God. It is horrible. It is beautiful. Glory meets the grotesque in the person, the broken body and spilled blood of Jesus, in human flesh, that we might relate to God and be redeemed by God. A gory glory speaks at the table. This enfleshed rhetoric of the poetry of God is dressed in wine and bread. And we like the old-time preacher, have to “ponder over the imponderable” as we see the fulcrum of our future.

You may be at a loss for words in the face of God’s gory glory. And perhaps that’s the point. Enough with our words. We need *the* Word. We need God. We need to hear from God. We need to see God. As we approach the table, maybe the only thing we should say as we encounter this untamable, incommensurable, yet relatable God, are the words of Job, “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear...but now my eyes see you..”(42:5) Hear God’s whirlwind voice calling to you from the table. See God’s body at the table. See God’s wild, free, and visible beauty. Come, and be in relationship. Come, taste, and see that the Lord is good.