

“God’s Response to Job”

Based on Job 38:1-7, 34-41

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You have heard this story before. A famous person, a superstar athlete, the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, gets pulled over by the police for some moving violation. As the officer explains what the driver did wrong and starts writing up a ticket the driver says, “Hey, don’t you know who I am?” They say that with the implication that the law doesn’t really apply to them, or they deserve a break. It’s a power move to avoid being held accountable for their actions. I doubt if such a move works that often. But it doesn’t hurt to try I suppose.

I thought about these situations when a person with power tries to avoid answering for their actions when reading God’s response to Job’s long and anguished demand to be heard. Job wants God to answer for Godself, to be held accountable for the unjust suffering that Job has endured. As I read God’s response, I could almost hear God basically saying to Job, “Don’t you know who I am!?” God doesn’t try to justify what happened to Job. Instead, God goes on about how powerful and full of understanding God is in comparison to Job. God doesn’t deserve to be held accountable by anyone, especially Job. Who does Job think he is? Doesn’t he know who God is? At least, that’s an impression I got when reading through the passage we have before us today.

Then, look at how God’s response starts, when God says, “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” In other words, God tells Job, “You don’t know what you are talking about.” It reminds me of what Job said to his wife after she said the only two sentences she gets in the whole book. She said, “Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die.” But Job responds by saying, “You speak as any foolish woman would speak.” In other words, “You don’t know what you are talking about.” This time it’s Job who is being called a fool. Turnabout is fair play I suppose.

But let’s look closer at God’s response. As we pay attention to the questions God asks, how God frames God’s response, we may see that

God's intent was not to humiliate Job or make some power move to avoid being held accountable. As I see it, what God is attempting to do is to help Job get a bigger picture of who God is. God is stressing the truth that God relates intimately to all creation. You may remember last week, Job was feeling abandoned by everyone. His three friends were no help. They didn't understand or sympathize, but accused Job of hiding something. Surely he was being punished for something. His friends were not consolers, but accusers. He was calling out to God but there was no response. He was alone in his suffering and misery. He was wondering, "God, where are you?" Well, God finally responds. And in these questions that God peppers Job with, God asks, "Job, where were you? Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?"

I'm not going to re-read the questions God asks. We only heard a few sections of chapter 38. If you go back and look at the whole chapter, you will see how God's response to Job delves into great detail about parts of creation, and how creation works, implying that God is behind it all. It was God who laid the foundation of the earth. It was God who determined how big the foundation would be. It was God who sunk the bases of the foundation into whatever is underneath the earth. Remember, we are going off the belief held in those days that the earth was a flat table. It is God that tells the clouds to rain. It is God that causes lightning bolts to fly. It is God who puts wisdom into the mind. It is God that provides food for lions and ravens.

Through all these rhetorical questions, God is making the point over and over that God intimately knows every aspect of creation. God had a hand in its making. God is present and active in every part of creation. When Job was asking his question, "Where are you, God?" God's response is, "Everywhere!" But God isn't just everywhere, observing everything. God is intimately engaged in everything that happens in creation, even when we don't sense God's presence or see God's activity. Just because we don't sense God's presence doesn't mean God isn't there. And God is influencing every situation. God is not a passive observer but an active participant in the ongoing processes of creation throughout the entire world, indeed, the whole cosmos. This is not a power trip, of God saying, "Don't you know who I am!?" Instead,

this is a detailed account from God of how intimately engaged God is with every aspect of the creation, even to the detail of measuring the foundation, opening the clouds so rain comes down, and making sure baby ravens are fed.

But there is something unsatisfying about God's response to Job. Job was wondering where God was because he wanted God to answer the question of "why." Job wanted to know from God, "Why am I suffering like this? What did I do to deserve this? Why are you doing this to me, God?" In God's response, God does not answer Job's "why" questions. In fact, God does what Jesus often did when people asked him a question. He responded by asking them a question. So annoying! What's with the questions, just give me the answer! Here, God doesn't answer Job's questions. God does not justify God's actions that contributed to Job's intense suffering. God doesn't say, "The reason why you are suffering so much is because I wanted to show Satan how pious and holy you are. At least I didn't allow Satan to kill you." God does not share with Job the conversation God and Satan had. The reason for Job's suffering remains a mystery for Job, an unanswered question.

But God does make it clear that God is not only intimately present to all of creation, but also provides for creation, actively engaged in all the processes of creation, from the making of worlds to the feeding of birds. Nothing is too big or too small for God's intimate attention. And that includes Job. God knows intimately what Job has experienced. God has sustained Job all this time that Job was railing against God and crying out in lament. God made space and gave Job the capacity to express his anger and despair. God heard every word. And God kept giving Job the breath and the voice and the brainpower he needed to keep speaking those words of anger and despair toward God. God enabled Job to cry out to God. God never made Job shut up. God never took away Job's voice. And that is grace.

Job's lament is justifiable. The indescribable loss and suffering he had to endure is beyond our experience, and for that we can be grateful. Gratitude is what God is trying to remind Job of as God offers the long awaited response. When considering the vastness of God's creative work, and how God is present and active in all of it, even in our own

lives, is something to be grateful for. Sometimes, life is simply brutal. Although not at the same level as Job, we experience times of devastating loss. We are confronted with a terrible illness that sends us to the hospital, and perhaps even prompts us to consider the real possibility of our own death. There are times in our personal life, our family, and in our community and nation, where lament is called for. Our whole nation entered into a time of lament after the attacks on 9/11. But in our collective grief over all that was lost that September day, not only the loss of life but the loss of our sense of security, there was also much that prompted gratitude. People lined up to give blood. Outpourings of support for the emergency workers in New York City gave them a bit of relief. We saw so much of the best of our common humanity in the days and months after. God was in the midst of all of that, prompting, influencing, making possible, all the individual acts of kindness, support, and healing. What we experienced then, Job was being encouraged to do by God, which was to hold together the tension of lament and gratitude; naming the hurt, crying out with sorrow, even rage, but also being grateful: for community, for life, for the rising of the sun and the calming grace of a full moon, the brilliant show of a lightening filled sky, the sparrows flitting around the bird feeder, the bees getting heavy with pollen from the sunflowers, all made possible by God's hand. The holding together of lament and gratitude: there is wisdom in that.

Rather than brush Job off as a foolish man, God not only responds to Job but responds in a way that helps Job gain understanding and wisdom about God and how God relates intimately with all of creation, tending and caring for every bit of it, even in times of great loss. God is not absent. God is intimately present. That's what God is telling Job, without answering Job's question of "why." When it came to answering Job's question, "Why did I have to suffer for no good reason?" God does not answer the question. The mystery of why bad things happen to good people, of why God allows evil and suffering to happen, remains an unsolved mystery. The ancient mystery of theodicy, if God is all powerful and all loving, then why is there evil, is an unsolved mystery in the book of Job. God shifts the focus away from "why" questions and

instead focuses on God's intimate knowledge, loving care, and constant presence in all of creation.

How does Job respond to God's response? That's for next week's sermon. What is your response? What do you lament today? What are you grateful for? Let's take a moment and have a conversation with God. We know that God is with us. So in the quiet of your heart, speak to God what you lament today. And then speak to God what you are grateful for today...