

“God is God: We Are Not”

October 21, 2018

Job 38:1-7 (34-41)

This October thanks to the lectionary, we are doing a sermon series on the book of Job. Job is a short heartbreaking book full of wisdom.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson calls Job “the greatest poem of ancient and modern literature” because it is one of the first pieces of writing that tackles theodicy head on “theo” meaning God and “dicy” from “dike” referring to justice. So God’s justice—why bad things happen to good undeserving people. God’s justice, or lake thereof. This book challenges the understanding of God as it relates to human suffering.¹

Patrick has preached the past two Sundays on the faithfulness of Job and on Job’s friends’ pastoral care (or lack thereof). For those of you who have missed a Sunday or who need a quick reminder, here is an excerpt from Patrick’s first sermon: the question of suffering:

At first glance this story seems simple enough: Job is a righteous man, religious in every way, and rich.

It starts out telling us that there was once a man named Job who was blameless and upright; he feared God and turned away from evil. He had seven sons and three daughters, thousands of sheep and camels and oxen and donkeys, and many servants. He was the greatest of all the people of the east. He was righteous, and he was blessed.

¹ Blevins, Rhonda “Where were You” Oct 8,2018. <https://www.chapelbythesea.net/sermons-1/2018/10/8/october-7-2018-where-were-you>

But then one day, God and Satan are having a conversation, and God says to Satan, “Have you seen my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth. He is blameless and upright and fears God and turns away from evil.”

And Satan says, “Well, yeah, because you take care of him. What if you didn’t? What if he lost his home and his livestock and his servants and his family? Would he still love you? Or does he only fear you because of what you do for him?”

And God says, “Let’s find out. Do whatever you want to him. Just don’t kill him.” And so Job loses his livestock and his servants and his home and his children. It is all taken from him.

In week one we addressed the question of suffering: that perhaps we aren’t asking the right questions, and how our faithfulness depends on the fact that God came down and embodied our suffering, that God sits with us in our pain and is not absent by any means.

Then last week we read of Job’s friends and a past acquaintance—they supposedly came to comfort Job. They sat with him in his suffering, which Patrick spoke to last week as being the best model for pastoral care that we could see in a book like Job. Until, however, they opened their mouths. Unfortunately the discomfort of Job’s plight led them to *explain* or *reason* the situation. Leaving Job in an even worse position, now wondering what he had done or his family had done to somehow *deserve* this suffering. Leaving Job classified as nothing worse than a sinner—surely this is why he is suffering—this is a reward for his evil ways. We left Job in a heap of his self-pity yelling at God telling God how he should be rewarded for his faithfulness and not suffering for no reason. Job knows he has done nothing worth what the hand he has been given. Job breaks the silence and announces to God this injustice. Job, out of his suffering puts God on trial—are you really this unjust God?

Our scripture this week begins at a pivotal moment in the book of Job. Some say this is the climax of this story: the whirlwind. After much silence on God's part, we find that at last God is evident, God is speaking, and it's not unnoticeable.

Now storms were not common where this story is believed to take place in the ancient near east. But scholars believe this "whirlwind" to be similar to that of what the gulf coast experienced last week with hurricane Michael. The type of storm that shakes you to your core. It was here, that Job hears from Yahweh.

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
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 to that they may go
And say to you "here we are"?

God answers Job, but not with any sort of tangible answer that I think explained his plight. God answers with these powerful images that focus on creation, the workings of the universe, things that might leave a human being in his or her tracks—this is something that humans have very little control of or knowledge of how it works the way it does. God is the one who calls creation into being and set it in motion and this THIS was done even before we existed.

God's rebuttal goes on for 4 chapters but never once does god answer job's question. Job's question was about justice and god's answer is about omnipotence, as far as I know that is the only answer human beings have ever gotten about why things happen the way they do. God only knows. And non of us is god.

It is almost as if God answered with "I am God, Job. I am God, you are not." In the midst of Job's suffering God pulls him in a completely different direction—Job

here *experiences* the mysteries of God. This whirlwind monologue leaves us even more confused than before. And rightly so. Because in this experience Job is reminded who he is—a creation of God in God’s world. A human being that will never grasp all that there is to know about the omnipotent Yahweh. And that will just have to do.

In this enigmatic answer, God invites job to experience a world full of great suffering and a world full of great beauty. To live into the paradox that is life as a child of God. A life that doesn’t always make sense. A life that doesn’t always go as planned. Because God is God—and we are not. The story of Job reminds us of our own humanity- our own finitudes and limits of understanding. Our role in this world is not to BE God, but rather to be a creation of God.

And this realization never really comes through to us in a sermon or a bible study or from a friend who likes to reason away something like Job’s friends. This realization that we are not God happens when we find ourselves caught up in a whirlwind that humbles us beyond measure. When we truly *experience* God like Job.

This morning I want to invite you think about a whirlwind moment you have had, whether it was as strong as Hurricane Michael or as timid as this weeks cold front. When have you been humbled by God beyond measure? Reminded that who you are in a human being, a child of God that is enamored by the mystery of God.

In my first job as a youth minister I had fiercely wise students. They were amazing and wise beyond their years. They saw the pitfalls of the explanations that we give life around God and God’s goodness, and on a regular basis they wanted to tackle theodicy with me. I felt way underqualified. In some ways, it made me feel the call to seminary even more. I wanted to go be equipped to answer the questions of our young people to help mold their faith.

So there I went—to learn from some of the best scholars around to study God and the Bible. They opened my mind and heart to so much wonder about God.

They added so much more to the simplistic equation I had for God and faith. They taught me to ask questions and be okay with not having the answers. I loved it.

But then I graduated—I was presented a “masters of divinity”. I had MASTERED the divine! Seminary taught me I could rope the moon, that God had called ME to teach the people of God! I was off to save the world one call at a time!

And I started working in larger churches that, just by sheer size, put pastors in a powerful position of “doing the ministry”. Many were tempted to idolize the pastor as a religious figurehead. Many churches today are like this, and researchers have called this model the “Pastor” led church. I began to fit right into this idea that I suddenly knew how to do ministry best and most functional way—that my higher education and qualifications somehow gave me keys to the kingdom. Just the right formula to have the best sermons, just the right things to do and say to keep a church vital and growing—a place to grow in faith.

I mean we had taken 5 ordination exams, gone to school for four years, learned Greek and Hebrew, taken a psychological evaluation, sat by the bedside of folks in the hospital, we had conquered seminary—I was a *professional* at this thing called Christianity---so naturally, I knew everything there was to know about stewardship, budgeting, building maintenance, liability insurance. *Everything*.

I graduated from seminary knowing a lot ABOUT God, but coming to serve in a congregation like St. John’s has taught me to *experience* God. To look in the mirror and realize my limits, my finitude and find comfort in the fact that I will *never* be able to stand in this pulpit and give you an answer as to why we experience the pain of life the way we do. And I shouldn’t try to. Because God is God and I am not.

In a mere 18 months I have had so much time to reflect and discern who I am as a newly minted master of the divine ordained pastor. And all of those titles are important, but also not.

Because I have seen God evident in me stepping back and realizing I am not Jesus. I am not the savior of any church, and I am not the savior of the world. And that is freeing beyond belief. It has freed me to walk with God's people, play with God's children, enamor at the wisdom of God's teenagers. It has freed me to rest in the mysteries of God.

My whirlwind has been my 3rd year of ordained ministry serving at St. John's. What is your whirlwind? When have you *experienced God* and been reminded that God is God and you are not?

Now is a busy time in our church. Some might not be able to sense it, but I can—it's stewardship season, it's nominating season, it's college application season, it's voting season. Our family is ripe with worry, and we are faithful people of God trying to be the best we can be. Looking for just the right thing to say to convince someone you think they're called to ministry (as if our phone calls could be the call of God). Looking for the perfect formula to meet the church budget with pledges. Working your tail off to make sure that this sport or this extracurricular will get my kid into college with a good scholarship and we can rest easy. Like there is just some magic politician that can make all the chaos in DC dissipate, and all we need to do is get them in office.

These things all come from a good place. We work hard because we care about the end result. We love our church, our nation, our kids so much we are willing to do what it takes to see it flourish.

But sometimes this passion leads us to believe something won't happen if we don't do it. That the church will crumble. That we perhaps are the saviors of something. And this stems from our overwhelming LOVE for God and our church and our nation and our family.

We live in a world constantly telling us in its own whirlwind that to achieve a goal we must try harder, we must work harder, we must stay at work longer, we must keep practicing to get that scholarship, we must keep agonizing over the stocks to

be the most efficient with our money. We must achieve more we have to BE more. And friends that will leave you in an exhausted heap that realizes the world goes on without you and you didn't stop to take in the beauty of life that God has created.

In the whirlwind, Job is reminded that God is God and he is not. God frees him up to *experience* the divine in the beauty of creation and the heartbreak of grief. Realizing *you* are not the savior of the most important things in your life will set you free. God invites you into this freedom—God invites you to *experience* and trust God.

My prayer for us is that we might rest in this freedom. That we might take in God's beautiful and painful world. That we might rest in the mystery of God. Rest in knowing that God's with us in our pain. That we need not say anything to explain the pain of life. That God is God and we are not.

What we learn from Job is that faith is not mastery over the mystery. Faith befriends the mystery. Because as GK Chesterson puts it: "The riddles of God are more satisfying than the solutions of man".

And thanks be to God for that.