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Lent 3 (Year B09)

Job 38: 1-7, 34-41  
I Cor. 1:18-25

### **Job, Jesus and the Question of Suffering: Mystery**

A few weeks ago someone shared a video clip with me. It was a comedian on a late night talk show.<sup>1</sup> He was doing a bit about how we live in such an amazing age, a time of access to world travel, instant communication, and ready availability to massive amounts of information, and yet, we are rarely satisfied. We complain about the relatively minor hassles of traveling and if something is not available immediately we become impatient. In one particularly poignant and funny example, he describes being on an airplane when the attendant announced that the airline would be offering a new service on this flight: all of the passengers would have access to free wireless internet. However, a minute later the attendant announced that they were having some technical difficulties and they would not be able to offer the service after all. At this the man in the next seat started cursing the airline under his breath. “How quickly the world owes him something,” the comic pointed out, “that he learned existed only a few minutes before.”

It’s a good point and it raises a good question doesn’t it? What is it that we think the world owes us? Does it owe us health, happiness, freedom? And what do we think God owes us? Does God owe us answers to all the questions our minds can pose? Does God owe us an explanation for the way things are? Does God owe us an answer to the question of suffering?

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.nbc.com/Late\\_Night\\_with\\_Conan\\_O'Brien/video/clips/everythings-amazing-nobodys-happy-10208/1049744/](http://www.nbc.com/Late_Night_with_Conan_O'Brien/video/clips/everythings-amazing-nobodys-happy-10208/1049744/)

Job thinks God owes him an answer. And finally, in today's passage, after much wrangling and pleading, Job gets his response from God. It is decidedly not the response Job or we are hoping for, but it is a response none the less. God's response is not to answer Job's question, but to ask Job some questions: "Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge?...Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know!"

It kind of sounds like God got up on the wrong side of bed doesn't it? Have you ever imagined God being this sarcastic? He is practically toying with Job. This is by no means a compassionate response. It is not, "I hear your pleas and I am coming to your rescue." It is putting Job in his place. It is God saying, "Oh I am sorry, I thought I was God and you were Job. Am I mixed up about that?" It is a rather disturbing portrayal of God, isn't it? I don't think we like to think of God as cranky or sarcastic or fed up. This is not the kind of God we want to encounter.

Barbara Brown Taylor points out that "Many people pray for an encounter with the living God. Those whose prayers are answered rarely ask for the same thing twice."<sup>2</sup> About Job's particular encounter with God she writes, "The divine rebuttal goes on for four whole chapters, but God never does answer Job's question. Job's question is about justice. God's answer is about omnipotence, and as far as I know that is the only reliable answer human beings have ever gotten about why things happen the way they do. God only knows and we are not God."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *When God is Silent* (Boston: Cowley, 1998), 57.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

In the Jewish tradition God's revealed name is not to be spoken. As I understand it this is more than simple respect. Rather it is the recognition of our ability to truly know and understand God. One theologian writes, "It is precisely our inability to say God that teaches us who God is. When we run out of words, we are very near the God whose name is unsayable."<sup>4</sup> In other words, a true encounter with God is terrifying, not so much because God is terrifying, but because when we encounter God we also, by necessity, encounter our own limits.

Another theologian writes, "The irruption of the presence of God in the midst of our world upsets all our accustomed categories. We ask, 'Why do God's people behave so badly?' 'Why doesn't God answer my prayer?' 'Why did this happen?' We ask, ... 'Is God a Republican or Democrat?' 'Is the Lord on the Palestinian side or the Israeli side?' The startlingly irrelevant answer is neither one or the other, but simply 'No.' God is not to be captured in any of our concepts. He escapes all of our categories. He cannot be imprisoned in any of our questions."<sup>5</sup>

An important reversal takes place in the passage from Job that we read for today. Its significance cannot be underestimated. The whole book Job has been pleading with God for an answer to his questions and when God does respond, God turns the questioning around on Job. The tables are turned. The roles are reversed. Job is put face to face with the limits of his perspective. That is the answer to suffering from the Book of Job. God is God. Job is not. It is not very satisfying, I admit, but at least, we can say, it is honest.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>5</sup> Fleming Rutledge, *The Bible and The New York Times* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 12.

Next week we will get Job's reaction to this encounter, but as far as getting an answer from God on the subject of human suffering, this is as close as we get today. Another way to say it, is it is mystery, which of course, is more than just another way of saying we don't know. It says we are incapable of knowing. So what does that say about us? What does it say about our faith? What does it say about our ability to say anything of certainty about God? For one it means that we are no good at all at predicting what God will or will not do. For another, it means that in order to place our trust in God we have to be willing to look a little foolish in the eyes of others. We want to make it seem like we know what we are doing. We prefer to posit a world that we can control and manipulate. For example, we don't like to think of ourselves as part of the animal kingdom, part of the ecosystem. We prefer to think of ourselves as apart from these things and in control, and to a certain degree we are. But never as much as we think we are. We give ourselves too much credit. We make what concerns us into ultimate concern. We create God in our image. We try to fence God in with our questions or with our doctrines, but our questions miss the point and our orthodoxies are too narrow.

In our passage from the NT, we read, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." This passage from Corinthians shares a lot of the same themes with our passage from Job, namely the disparity between divine wisdom and our own. In what may seem like a somewhat surprising move for someone trying to promote Christianity, Paul lifts up the cross as the ultimate example of God's wisdom seeming like foolishness to the world. It is just not the way we do things. Why would an all powerful God become weak? If you have the ability to set things right through the use of power, why not do it? Isn't that the easiest way to accomplish the greatest good?

Paul knows that the cross mocks our understanding of power. As one person has put it, God is powerful enough to become weak. This is hard for us to grasp. It is counterintuitive. It seems wrong and foolish, Paul points out. But the important thing for us to get here is that Paul is not trying to be cute. He is making this point because it is a significant one that tells us something necessary about God and ourselves.

And if he is right, then it means something important for what we do here as a community of faith. Think about it. If we walk into church and nothing strikes us as strange or different, then something is wrong. One of the commentators I read on the Corinthians passage suggested that “From time to time, Christians should stand back and acknowledge how odd our faith looks.” I love that! It is odd, isn’t it, our attempts to name God? And not only is it odd, but I would add impossible. It is foolish of us even to try. We cannot possibly think that *all of this* will get us anywhere, can we? We have our answer. It is the answer of Job and Paul. God is a mystery, which means that not only don’t we know, but it is impossible for us to know the why’s and wherefore’s of God. So why do we try? Because claiming God’s ways are a mystery is not an excuse or reason to stop trying to seek them out. Because, as Job’s story indicates, it is in the trying, however futile, that we run into the wall of our own limits, that we realize how insignificant we really are, how hopeless, in a sense, how foolish we are to even try to name God. And when we have run out of words, run out of the will to keep pushing forward, run out of energy, run out of confidence in ourselves and our own abilities to control our world or somehow understand it all, that is precisely the moment in our lives when we come closest to learning who this God really, truly is; this God whose name we dare not and cannot call by name; it is precisely then we will know, as Job came to know, that God is God and we are not!

*Let us pray: In our weakness, O God, may we find the strength to rely on others and on you. In our foolishness, grant us the wisdom to keep seeking and trusting. In our questioning, deliver us from the need for easy answers. In our living, give us a sense of gratitude for what we have been given and a willingness to work for justice for all, knowing that you walk with us; through Christ our Lord. Amen.*