

Date: 10/17/21

## God Answers From The Whirlwind

Texts: **Job 38:1-7, 34-41; Isaiah 53: 4-12**; “Not yet a story”, by Margaret Atwood, from *Alias Grace*

I think it's great that we had Mara here this morning at the very beginning of her journey of faith and life. In her lifetime, she's going to ask a lot of questions, and her parents are going to give her a lot of answers. But those answers will be tempered by her age when she asks them. When she says, “Mommy, where do babies come from?” as a four-year old, she might hear a story about a stork. She certainly won't hear a story about the double-helix of DNA and the evolution of hominins, or a story about how the heavier elements in our body come from exploding or colliding stars, so that we literally come from the stars themselves, because we are part star dust! She simply wouldn't be able to understand it. She's not ready even for the birds and the bees, much less how humans reproduce, and these other facts about life and the universe.

Today in our text from Job, we have something similar happening. For the last 36 chapters, since chapter 2, Job and his friends have been debating about the reason for suffering. His friends keep insisting that it's because Job sinned. They think suffering only comes from sinning, so if you're suffering, you must have sinned. Job insists that he's innocent, a fact confirmed by the narrator, and demands that God answer his questions about why he's suffering.

It's in our text today that the story takes a surprise twist: God actually appears to Job in a whirlwind and responds. But God's response is not an answer. It's a series of questions for Job. God starts off by asking Job: “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins and get ready, because now I have some questions for you!” One commentator likens it to a modern rap challenge, where one rapper lays out a challenge, and another has to respond in a smoother and cleverer way. Job has laid out the challenge with his questions. Now God is responding with some questions of God's own.

God's questions are about the order of creation, or, in other words, how things work. “Where were you,” God asks, “when the foundations of the earth were being laid, when all the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?” Job's answer, though he doesn't say it, must be, “Not there.” God asks about the clouds, and the water cycle? Know how that works, Job? “Nope.” How about the way that creation sustains itself, the delicate balance of predator and prey, like lions and ravens? Got any idea how that was set up? “Not a clue.” God continues asking about the animals in creation and the cycle of life in the next chapter. Can Job understand how any of that works? In each case, of course, the answer is ‘no.’

God implies that these are simple questions to one who understands, but the order of the universe with regard to suffering is much harder. There is an answer, but it's not one that Job will be able to understand. From God's perspective, it all makes sense. From Job's, it's impossible to see.

God finally asks, “Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified?”

By asking these questions, God puts a context around Job and his suffering. Job is just a small part of the larger creation, full of beauty and mystery. If Job cannot understand the simpler things which God has questioned him about, how could he possibly understand a deep and complicated matter like the reason for suffering? Job is like a little child asking where babies come from: it's a good question, and there is an answer, but Job is not mature enough nor wise enough yet to hear it. God asks him to trust that the Creator who ordered the world and the universe has ordered human life as well. God's questions serve to de-center Job and show him his place within the grandeur of creation itself. At the end of it, I think Job must have felt in awe, and somewhat small.

I think he might have felt as I did, when I first saw the picture of the earth taken from the Voyager 1 spacecraft was about 3.7 billion miles from the sun, out beyond Neptune and quickly leaving the solar system for the interstellar void. Before it left the solar system, mission controllers turned its camera back towards home and took one final picture. From that distance, earth was nothing but a tiny pale blue dot on a canvas of immense blackness. Everything that has ever happened in human history, in the history of life as we know it, has happened on that tiny blue dot in the middle of the immense nothingness of space. It was humbling to know that even just within our solar system, our whole planet was so small, so insignificant. Without the arrow the scientists added to the picture, you might have missed the earth.

God offers us no intellectual answer to the problem of suffering in Job. What God does is remind us that we are not the center of the universe, that we are not the "be all and end all". Creation is much bigger than we are, much more complicated than we suspect, much more mysterious than we can imagine. Job has sought to put God on trial and instead, God insists on being the one asking questions. God asks Job to consider the wonders of creation, the natural law that God has built into the world, and the way that God directs everything just as God sees fit. Job has been seeking to find out a way to control God: just tell me the rules and I'll use them to get the blessing that I seek. I know that not all suffering comes because of sin, but I want to know where it does come from so that I can do the right thing and avoid it.

God's answer comes from the whirlwind itself, and is, in part, not just the words, but the actual whirlwind: a whirlwind is a power that can't be controlled, that blows into human lives and leaves everything changed behind it. The whirlwind can be destructive, but sometimes the whirlwind is the message.

I've told this story before, but I want to tell it again because it speaks to what God is doing here in Job. It's the story of the time when I was asking God questions about why there was suffering in the world, when I wasn't content with the way God was running the world. It was after yet another shooting, and I was crying out the way Job cries out to God: why, why is it this way? Where are you, God? Why do you let these innocent people die, shot dead just because they decided to go to the movies one day? Are you even there? Is my life's work in vain? Just then I was driving by the scene of a whirlwind, where a tornado had come through a few years before, and I said to God, if you're there, give me some kind of a sign, a big wind or something so that I can know it's not all in vain.

Then I said, "no, not a big wind, but a small wind, just for me and my family, not to hurt us but just enough to let me know you're there." Then the theologian in me took over, and I said, "No, God, I

know, it's not right to ask for signs. I'm just down right now. I still believe. I'm still hanging on. It's okay." And then I got back to the cottage where we were staying, and thought no more about it.

But two weeks later, as we were down at the shore, I was standing in the water holding Noah, with Kate and Emily and Adam and my mother on the dock behind me. And I saw a stirring in the water a couple of feet away from me. It caught my attention. I looked. "What is that?" And up from the water came a whirlwind, a waterspout, and it grew to be about 10 feet high and as broad as my stretched out arms, and it swept over me, and over Kate and the kids and my mom behind me, blowing over the sun umbrella on the dock, bending the metal right over, and sending the hats and towels blowing into the water. As I turned around it went about 100 feet along the shore, until it exhausted itself just in front of our neighbors dock.

It wasn't until I was driving past the spot where the old tornado had blown through that I remembered what I'd asked for: a big wind, but not too big, for me and my family, not to hurt us but to let me know that God was there. I got my whirlwind. God spoke to me out of it without saying a word. And so I feel a certain affinity to Job, who also got his whirlwind. Neither whirlwind provided an intellectual answer. I still don't understand why God allows shootings to take place. Job still doesn't understand why he had to suffer. But God answered with a gentle power that interrogates all our questions, and points to an answer that is bigger than we can imagine, and beyond our comprehension, from the limited viewpoint we have from our place on this pale blue dot in an infinite creation.

We are God's children, and we aren't yet able to understand everything that God understands. But, like children, we know that we can trust God to see that, in the end, everything will be all right.

God's final message to Job comes after Job is feeling small and insignificant in the wider scope of the whole of creation. That message serves to lift Job up again into a higher place: "Who is Job, this human who darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Why, he is one with whom the living God speaks!" Though we are but specks of dust on a speck of dust in the cosmos, humans are also the ones whom the Creator loves, and speaks to, and comes to save in Jesus Christ.

In all that we go through, that message can sustain us until we finally see God face to face in the new heaven and the new earth, where suffering and death shall be no more, and every tear shall be wiped from every eye.

Amen