

*“Where Were You When I Laid the Foundation of the Earth?”**

Job 38: 1-24; 37-41

Scott Black Johnston

Trinity Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia

Job 38: ¹ Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: ² “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? ³ Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. ⁴ Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. ⁵ Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? ⁶ On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone ⁷ when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? ⁸ Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?— ⁹ when I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, ¹⁰ and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, ¹¹ and said, “Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped”? ¹² Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place, ¹³ so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth, and the wicked be shaken out of it? ¹⁴ It is changed like clay under the seal, and it is dyed like a garment. ¹⁵ Light is withheld from the wicked, and their uplifted arm is broken. ¹⁶ Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? ¹⁷ Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? ¹⁸ Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare, if you know all this. ¹⁹ Where is the way to the dwelling of light, and where is the place of darkness, ²⁰ that you may take it to its territory and that you may discern the paths to its home? ²¹ Surely you know, for you were born then, and the number of your days is great! ²² Have you entered the storehouses of the snow, or have you seen the storehouses of the hail, ²³ which I have reserved for the time of trouble, for the day of battle and war? ²⁴ What is the way to the place where the light is distributed, or where the east wind is scattered upon the earth?”

Job 38:

³⁷ Who has the wisdom to number the clouds? Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens,

³⁸ when the dust runs into a mass and the clods cling together? ³⁹ “Can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions, ⁴⁰ when they crouch in their dens, or lie in wait in their covert? ⁴¹ Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food?”

* This sermon was preached on July 1, 2007 at Trinity Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia.

The book of Job, which lies at the heart of the Old Testament, wrestles with the most difficult theological question of them all: “If there truly is a good God, then why is there arbitrary suffering in this world?” Why, if God cares for creation, do diseases sweep down and claim our loved ones? Why do innocent people (working to provide for their families) get crushed by violent forces? Why doesn’t God do something about the hurricanes, the plane crashes, the cancers, and the car bombs? Why, in the words of Rabbi Kushner, do bad things happen to good people? These questions are the hub around which the story of Job turns.

You remember how the story goes. Job, we are told from the outset, is a righteous man. In fact, one afternoon God points this out to Satan while they are surveying the world from God’s front porch. Peering down through the clouds, Satan responds, “Well, what do you expect? Job’s got a good life. He has a big, happy family. He’s rich. He’s got servants, and lots of sheep, camels, and donkeys. What does Job have to complain about? Of course, he’s righteous.” At this assessment, God winces, “I think you’re wrong. I don’t think Job is righteous because of his earthly success.” At this pronouncement, Satan leans back and smiles, “Want to bet?”

So begins the saga of Job’s spectacular and terrible downfall. First, he loses his oxen teams to raiding bandits. After that, his sheep and his servants are wiped out in a freak thunderstorm, and then a class five tornado levels his house—killing all the young people in his family. The devastation continues when disease infects Job’s body. Covered with painful sores, Job sits down in a pile of ashes to lament his fate. What has happened to his life? Things have gone so dreadfully wrong that, when Job’s wife looks at her diseased husband sitting amongst the cinders, she suggests that his best option is to “curse God and die.” Then, just when it seems that his misery could not possibly increase, Job’s friends show up. One by one they stop by to comfort their buddy, but they also cannot help speculating on the reason for Job’s downfall. Each of them concludes that Job has done something wrong—committed some secret sin, harbored some hidden wickedness—which has resulted in all of this travail. This is the final straw for Job. It seems that every possible tragedy has happened to this righteous man, and now his friends suggest that he *deserves* this loathsome fate, every last diseased sore of it. Sitting in his pile of ashes, Job is a man to be pitied.

At this point, I should probably say that I do *not* believe that Job is an historical figure. I actually think that most of the people who populate the pages of the Old Testament did walk around the ancient world and participate in events in that region. Yet, Job is different. The story of Job has very few historical moorings. The characters here (the friends, Job’s wife, even Job himself) are archetypes, representing various positions on the central question: Why do bad things happen to righteous people? So, as a piece of biblical literature, Job is best understood by us as a short story, or perhaps even an ancient play. In other words, if we compare Job to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, it reads better than if we try and make it into something like *The Political History of Denmark*. I hope it goes without saying that this way of looking at the book has no bearing on whether or not it is true. The truths of Job (and *Hamlet*, too, for that matter) are apparent in the power of the subject material, in the great interest that this book has had for theologians and philosophers and people like us down through the centuries. Job is true because it articulates with clarity and honesty our eternal struggle with human suffering.

OK, so back to the play. Having endured his own friends’ attempts to blame him

for his suffering, Job finally gets a chance to speak. Asserting his innocence, Job states why he thinks these horrible things have happened to him. His answer may surprise us.

The great philosopher and mathematician, Gottfried Leibniz, once observed that people of faith commonly try to hold together three beliefs in their heads and hearts. The three beliefs are: 1) God is all powerful; 2) God is all good; and 3) evil exists. According to Leibniz, it is difficult for a rational being to hold all three of these beliefs at the same time without diminishing one of them. In seminary, we came to call this approach to explaining the problem of human suffering “the fudge factor.” You had to “fudge” on the truth of one of these three claims to hold to the other two. Leibniz was famous for denying (“fudging on”) the existence of evil, a position that was lampooned in Voltaire’s famous novel, *Candide*.

Where does Job come down? Well, Job would agree with Voltaire. Given all of the terrible things that have happened to him, he is certain that evil exists. He also expresses no doubt in God’s power. In his own monologues, Job never questions whether or not God is in control of the universe. He believes that God is sovereign. So, where does that leave us? Well, the only thing left, according to Leibniz, is God’s goodness. Job expresses concern about God’s character. What if God is not all good, he wonders; perhaps God has a dark side. Or maybe, Job suggests, God simply doesn’t care. Maybe God is indifferent to justice. Maybe it doesn’t matter to God that Job and his family have been battered and bloodied by the universe.

After all the characters have had their chance to speak in this ancient play, God finally appears in Act 3 (or, as we typically mark it, chapter 38). A whirlwind twists onto stage and from it comes the voice of the divine. The voice begins by asking a question, “Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” Listen up, mortal. You better fasten your seatbelt, because I have questions for you. The first one is a doozy: “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?” It’s not a hard question for Job. Job knows the answer. I was nowhere. I was not. I didn’t exist. It’s not a difficult question for any of us. It’s an intimidating one. Or, at least, it’s meant to be. It reminds me of certain conversations with my children wherein I have resorted to the phrase “Because I’m the Daddy!” to explain why things are the way they are in our household.

However, as time goes by, I think Izzy and Ollie are less and less accepting of that response as a legitimate answer. They want logic to determine how they are treated, a consistency to our family system, and I think they are right (and I am actually proud that they have such expectations). All of which may explain why I have sympathy for the way in which comedian Woody Allen imagines Job’s response to God’s question, “Where were you when I created all that is?” According to Allen, Job responds, “That’s no answer!” And then Job falls to his knees and cries out to the Lord, “Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory. Thou hast a good job. Don’t blow it.” Allen is right. The questions that God asks in Job 38 are not an answer. They do not explain why awful things happen to us and to the people that we love. So, what is God up to here? Is this some incredible dodge: “I’ll throw them off balance with questions that intimidate them, and then (while they are still dazzled by my bigness) I’ll slip away without covering the tough stuff.”

In reading through Job, a person quickly comes to the realization that all of chapter thirty-eight is made up of God’s questions. In fact, these questions stretch all the way

through chapters 39, 40, and 41, too. For four chapters, God questions and questions and questions Job. The inquiries range far and wide. Listen again to a few of the things that God asks: “Who makes rain in the desert?” “Who knows the ways of the stars in their courses?” “Who pushes the seas back into their basins?” “Who sees the young ravens in their nest when they cry out for food?” “Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?” The questions pile on each other until they are, quite frankly, overwhelming. Yet, nowhere in this expanse can I find an answer to our persistent question: Why do bad, terrible, awful things happen to good, decent, righteous people? When this question is in play, why in the world is God asking if we are familiar with the birthing schedule of mountain goats? It seems absurd.

Amy and I and the kids have been up in Montreat, North Carolina, for the past two weeks. It was our first time at the conference center. For years, I have been hearing about the wonders of the place (It has a zealous booster club.); so, it was a good thing to witness the mountain retreat that is so much a part of southeastern Presbyterianism. We left there as new fans.

One day while I was preparing to preach, and the kids were in the clubs program, Amy was standing on the balcony of Assembly Inn looking out over Lake Susan. An elderly gentleman approached, remarked on the view, and asked Amy how long she had been coming to Montreat. “This is my first time here,” she responded. “Oh no,” he said, in a stunned, almost disbelieving voice. “How can you not have been to Montreat before?” And with that he began peppering her with questions, questions that revealed his love for the place: “Have you been up to Lookout Rock? Isn’t the view from there marvelous?” “Do you like the way the air smells?” “Have you seen the swan? Do you know that his mate died this past spring?” “Isn’t it wonderful how things cool down at night?”

When Job sat down in ash to try to figure out why tragedy had pounced on him and his loved ones, he wavered (he fudged) in his own mind on the goodness of God. He wondered if God even cared about his plight. It is at that moment that the whirlwind appears. It is at that moment that God starts firing questions at Job. As the questions roll along—questions about young ravens crying out when food is scarce, questions about whales in the sea, and winds and snow and war and death—the questions sound a lot like that man looking down from a balcony at a place that he cared so deeply about that he could not believe that a forty-something woman had never been there before.

What if we hear God’s questions that way? Where were you when I laid the foundations of a world that I love so deeply that I am aware of every little thing that happens, from waves crashing on the shore to mountain goats giving birth? It’s true, the questions that God asks Job, one after the other, do not provide the answer to our questions about suffering, but they do something else. They sketch a portrait of a God who cares deeply about every creature on this planet. And, perhaps this news is even more sustaining in this journey through life than the answer to a philosophical puzzle that we, in our wisdom, may never be able to solve.