

Job's Tour of the Universe

Job:38-42

Buz Wilcoxon

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Greenville, South Carolina

Some people hate word problems. You know what I'm talking about—those made-up situations designed to make life miserable for teenagers in math classes. (*If train A leaves the station at 5:14 am and is traveling at 43 mph....*) Word problems are tricky little beasts. First, you have to listen to the whole story, then go back and figure out what the problem is, then decide what math equation would best solve the problem, and finally start plugging away at the numbers looking for the answer. 'Seems like a lot of time spent on something that could have been asked in a much simpler way.

In some ways, the book of Job is like a biblical word problem that asks the question: "Why do bad things happen to good people?" Job, a righteous, upstanding member of society, who loves his family and honors his God, is forced to suffer terrible calamities, and the author of the book of Job spends 42 long chapters making us ask the question, "Why?"

In the span of one devastating day, Job has his flocks of animals stolen, his servants murdered, and his seven children killed in a windstorm. And, as if that weren't tragedy enough, Job is afflicted with a terrible skin disease. And so, the question of the Book of Job—the word problem to be figured out—would seem to be, "How can we explain this suffering?" If God *loves* Job, then why does God allow or cause this to happen? If God is *all powerful*, then why does God not prevent these painful events? These sound like pretty familiar questions, don't they? More than a few of us have asked them on many a sleepless night.

The book of Job is the biblical way of addressing these questions through narrative. Out of the whirlwind of his suffering, Job tries to make sense of tragedy. His three best friends pay a pastoral call to comfort him in his pain. Yet, they are so bewildered by the suffering of someone they love, that they try to make sense of it themselves. They try to find a reason to explain Job's pain. They try to solve the word problem with long-familiar clichés.

As the story unfolds, we see that Job's friends are not unthinking or unfeeling. They are good "churchy" folks who use good "religious" lines of reasoning to try to explain Job's suffering. They say things like, "Job, I know it's hard, but God must have a reason for this." Or "Job, you'll be better for going through this." Or "Job, God just needed a few more angels up in heaven, and your kids are in a better place." His friends mean well, as most of us do when we mutter these pious sounding clichés.

But Job sees through their words and snaps back with the vivid reality of his senseless suffering. Even with his friends around him, Job is lonely. Desperately lonely! He is the only one in the universe who knows the full depths of his suffering, and Job isn't willing to settle for any easy answers to explain away his pain. He cries out for an answer to the word problem that his life has become.

Job raises his voice to ask these questions of God. Finally, after 37 chapters, Job becomes so upset with God's silence that he demands an answer. Suddenly we

find ourselves pulled out of a high school math classroom into a court of law. Job has clearly watched his fair share of *Law and Order*, so he knows all the right legal words to use in demanding that God answer his accusations. Job insists on his day in court to lay his case against God. Since Job knows that he has always been a good person, he is certain that he will be acquitted and that God will be found guilty of causing his suffering. Job speaks like a seasoned lawyer, calling God to the witness stand to give an account for the pain and suffering that he has been forced to endure. Finally, when Job stops talking, God responds...and God responds through a voice in a whirlwind. Don't miss that detail! God speaks to Job through a whirlwind, a storm, a tornado--the same natural disaster that took the lives of Job's children!

But before we turn to God's reply from the storm, let's be clear about the fact that Job is a righteous man. He is righteous at the beginning of the story and remains righteous throughout it—that's all we are told. Job is not wrong to question God. We must remember that Job's yelling at God is deep down an act of sincere faith. Job is so sure of God's love and God's justice that he knows the Lord Almighty isn't going to be scared away by his yelling. To question and even doubt God can be an act of faith, because in doing so, we bring our real selves, our whole selves, not just our nice, polite Sunday selves, before God, and we trust that God won't run and hide from our anger, pain, or doubt.

So, back to the story. Our text picks up when God finally begins to speak. God hears Job's demands. God hears all his words of mourning and pain. God hears his well-reasoned legal defense. But now it is God's turn to reply. God has been called to the witness stand. God has been sworn in and has promised to tell "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth" so help *Me God*, and this truth takes Job's breath away. It is something Job could never have been prepared to hear . . . or see! "Gird up your loins" God says. "Put on your hiking boots, buckle up your seatbelt, because now it's time for me to question you, Job, and you're in for the ride of your life!" And thus begins Job's tour of the universe. God takes Job to the foundations of the earth, the origin of the oceans, the dwelling place of the dawn, the gates of death itself, the storehouses of rain, snow, sleet, and hail. God takes Job through the heavenly clouds and shows him the vastness of the universe.

God doesn't stop there. God pulls a U-turn on the Divine *Magic School Bus* and heads back to earth to show Job a family of wild lions with cubs who are hungry. God shows Job the mating rituals of mountain goats and the birthplace of deer. Job is allowed to see the strength of wild horses and the awkwardness of ostriches. God yanks Job's imagination wide open as he is shown everywhere on earth "where the buffalo roam and the deer and the antelope play." Then Job's vision soars skyward to see the wisdom of the hawks and the insight of the eagles as they stalk their prey. And, as if this weren't enough, God even takes Job to the deepest depths of the ocean to the dwelling place of the mythical sea monster, Leviathan--the embodiment of chaos itself! Hurricanes, tornados, earthquakes, tsunamis, and forest fires are all rolled into one in this monster of the deep.

A few years ago, I went to hear a friend preach at his church. I sat down in a pew behind a boy who was five or six years old. As my friend read through the first chapter of Genesis, his voice rolled with inflection as he described God's mighty works of creation from the first days of existence. As he read about the separation of light and dark, day and night, land and water, the boy in front of me sat silently coloring

on his bulletin. This description of creation wasn't nearly as interesting as the blue, green, and red stick-figures he was creating. Finally, my friend reached the point in the story where he read about the fifth day of creation, where all the living things are brought forth from the waters. "So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves..." he said. With that, the boy in front of me suddenly sat up and yelled, "SEA MONSTERS... WOW! COOL!"

There's something about these mythical monsters that wakes us up and causes us to *wonder*...even in church. And that certainly was the case for Job as well. Job demanded an account from God. Job summoned God to court. And what did God do? God took Job by the hand and walked him outside of the courtroom, down the courthouse steps, across town to the zoo. Job asks a moral question, and God gives him a biological response—a menagerie of answer. Job says, "How on earth can you call yourself all-loving and let these horrible things happen to me?" And God responds by showing him how God cares for every living creature on the face of the earth, even the scariest beasts imaginable.

Through the *Discovery Channel*, *National Geographic Magazine*, and programs like the wonderful series *Planet Earth*, modern technology has enabled us to catch a glimpse of the amazing vastness of creation. We can see the towering tops of redwood trees and the deep darkness of the ocean. Even as we become more familiar than any previous generation with the expanse of the universe, still somewhere deep inside of us resides that same sense of amazement and wonder that filled our thoughts when we first looked at a dinosaur skeleton in a museum or saw the swirling of amebas through a microscope. God's creation is larger and more beautiful than our minds can ever imagine. Yet, as Job was shown, God cares for and provides for even the tiniest of living things on this and on whatever other planets there may be in the far reaches of the universe. God is a God of LIFE, and God brags to Job about each species as a grandmother brags about her grandchildren.

Biblical scholar William Brown points out that God's response in these last chapters of the book of Job present "the most panoramic view of creation in all of the Hebrew Bible."¹ Job cries out and demands an explanation from God, and instead, Job is taken on a *Magical Mystery Tour* of the universe. Job asks God the big question that all of us want answered. But God's response is not an answer. God doesn't answer Job's questions about his suffering. Even the suffering that is "answered" must still be borne. God does not solve the word problem. God shows Job a different way of seeing the world.

God stretches Job's vision beyond his imagination. Not only does God show Job things he would never be able safely to see, but God does so in a way that convinces him of how much God cares for creation...all of creation...even Job himself. In seeing the lions, ostriches, hawks and wildebeests, Job is shown that all of us, all created beings, have a place in God's good creation. All God's creatures "got a place in the choir." Even Leviathan, the monstrous beast of chaos, is included in God's providential care.

From this vision of the grandeur of God's care for the whole of creation, Job not only is given a sense that he belongs, but, even more, an assurance that he is never alone. As part of God's good creation, Job is a citizen of the universe, a child of creation, a brother to giraffes, elephants, chipmunks, and goldfish. We human beings are not alone on this earth; there were many days of creation before we ever showed

up, and *all* of creation is together proclaimed good.

Presbyterians like to talk about the power of God, and when we do, we often use a familiar phrase, “the sovereignty of God.” We throw the phrase around sometimes to show how much we know; other times to show how much we believe. We hold fast and strong to the truth that in the end, God is in charge and we are not. But sometimes, I think, there’s a piece that we forget. When we are true to our Reformed roots, we don’t just talk about the sovereignty of God. Period. No, we confess and believe in “the sovereignty of God’s *love*.” As the *Brief Statement of Faith* puts it, “In sovereign love God created the world good.” God’s care for all creation isn’t just a show of divine power; it is also an expression of God’s love for us...all of us in creation. Job is shown God’s sovereignty and power in an amazing way, and this vision of divine care is not only good news for Job, but for all of us as well.

After Job’s vision is over, God blesses him by restoring some of what was taken from him. Job’s health is returned, he has more riches than he did before, and even ten more children. When we come to the end of the book, we are tempted to breathe a sigh of relief, as if we had finally come to an easy answer to our word problem—a moral to summarize Job’s life—a nice ribbon to tie up all the loose ends of our bewilderment. We might sum it up like this: “In the end, if you are faithful, God will bless you and make everything turn out all right.” Amen! Case closed. Time to go to lunch.

But such a simplistic summation ignores the deep seriousness of Job. Yes, in the end, Job’s fortunes are returned. Job has many more children. But I would be willing to bet that not a day went by that he didn’t grieve the death of his first seven children. God doesn’t snap some divine fingers and make everything right in Job’s life. His pain surely remained. His grief was still real, but through his vision from God, Job was able to begin the slow, agonizing process of living his life after tragedy. One day at a time, Job was able to say, no matter how much it hurts, “I know that I am not alone.”

Most of us will never have such a direct revelation from God, but the good news of this story is that God, who is at work throughout creation, is just as surely at work in our lives, expanding our visions of the world just as God did for Job. God does this by taking us outside of our familiar places, out of our comfort zones.

God had to take Job all around the universe. For some of us, God takes us to other countries on mission trips, to a Habitat for Humanity work site, or to an afterschool tutoring program. God picks us up out of our self-made little worlds and takes some of us to schools in far away cities or to hospital rooms right here in town. God lures us to Vacation Bible School classrooms or to Montreat Youth Conferences. God pulls us outside of ourselves and puts us to work at homeless shelters, recycling centers, and the local humane society. God calls us, and we respond in any number of different ways—from going off to seminary to going down the street to the soup kitchen. God constantly pulls us to new places, new people, and new experiences. And in doing so, God expands our moral horizons and shows us that the world is nowhere near as simple as we may have thought. God humbles us, just as God humbled Job.

But let us not forget that this humility is *good news*. God did not just drive Job to his knees and put him in his place. God lovingly used creation itself to show Job that he truly did have a place, even in the midst of a chaotic, confusing, and painful world.

As we come to the end of this sermon, like Job, we are still left with our age-old questions. We still have what seems like a word problem on our hands. But it is not words we lack for finding our place in God's creation. It is *the Word* that blesses us with the gift of a new willingness to live and love without having all the answers. Even in the midst of our deepest pain, God is at work in our lives and the lives of all the people and creatures around us. And so, if we listen with more than our ears and look with more than our eyes, we, too, may come to know that we are not alone and never will be. And at some level, deeper than we may yet know, that is comforting beyond all our words.

Note

1. William P. Brown, *The Seven Pollars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 116.