

Preaching Job's God

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In 1955, three years before the premier of his Pulitzer Prize-winning play *J.B.*, Archibald MacLeish preached a sermon at the First Church of Christ, Farmington, Connecticut. The title of the sermon was “The Book of Job.” MacLeish begins with these words: “To preach is to speak with something more than one’s own voice — something that only ordination can give, that only the relation of minister to congregation can make possible.”¹ MacLeish immediately goes on to say that he is not a preacher, not even a religious person in any ordinary sense; he is a poet whose art requires him to think about the meaning of life, in other words, about the things that concern religion. And yet, I find it instructive that MacLeish chose first the format of a sermon, not a play, to talk about Job’s God. He frames the *whence* and *whether* of his thoughts as follows:

How can we believe in our lives unless we can believe in God, and how can we believe in God unless we can believe in the justice of God, and how can we believe in the justice of God in a world in which the innocent perish in vast meaningless massacres, and brutal and dishonest men foul all the lovely things?

And then these words, now more directly focused on the Book of Job:

Job’s sufferings are unjustified. They are unjustified in any human meaning of the word justice. And yet they are God’s work—a work that could not be done without the will of God.... If the universe is unjust, if God permits our destruction without cause, how are we to believe in life? And if we cannot believe in life, how are we to live?²

Surely there are many sermon topics to be mined in the Book of Job, but I suspect most of us would agree to some extent with MacLeish: sooner or later we have to figure out how to preach about Job’s God. How can we believe in life if we cannot believe in God? And if we cannot believe in life—or God—then how are we to live?

The Prologue and Epilogue of Job (Job 1-2 + 42:7-17) reads like a set piece.³ Its flat prose, strategically guided by an omniscient narrator, seems focused on a single, but virtually unswallowable, message: suffering pays. “Blameless” and “upright” persons, persons who “fear God” and “turn away from evil” with complete integrity, may lose everything; their children’s lives may be snuffed out “for no reason”; but if they persist in humility, then they will be doubly rewarded in the end. The ending might well have been scripted by Walt Disney. In the Disney version of life, the world is just fine as it is; all injustice is temporary; all suffering makes sense; and when questions arise, consolation is always preferable to truth. The connections between what is and what ought to be remain essentially untroubled; they may tremble momentarily,

but in the end they kiss and make up. From a contemporary perspective, the Czech novelist Milan Kundera describes this Walt Disney reading of life as kitsch, crudely, but perhaps effectively defined as the “absolute denial of shit.”⁴

Presumably, ancient sensibilities were somewhat similar. The history of transmission of the Book of Job suggests that the Prologue-Epilogue version of the story was not adequate for its readers. Thus, the final form of the book splices the prose framework with a lengthy poetic debate between Job and his friends (Job 4-27, 32-37) and between Job and God (Job 38-42). It seems that the “all’s-well-that-ends-well” conclusion, which affirms a world in which divine providence always works, is hardly ever sufficient. In William Kennedy’s recent novel, *Chango’s Beads and Two-Tone Shoes*, Daniel Quinn is a newspaperman caught between the objectivity required by his profession and the cynicism his real life imposes. Perhaps he speaks for all readers, ancient and modern, when he concludes that “the simple declarative sentence is an illusion.”⁵

The only “dialogue” between Job and God occurs in Job 38:1-42:6. God dominates the dialogue (123 verses are allotted to God; nine verses to Job). If preachers want to take the pulse of the conversation between the God who afflicts Job “for no reason” and the Job who insists on asking God, “Why?” the fraught dialogue that emerges from this interchange is the first place to begin.

The structure of the dialogue is easy to discern. There are two divine speeches and two responses from Job. God’s first response (Job 38:1-40:2) begins with a series of seemingly impossible questions addressed to Job: “Where were you?” “Can you?” “Have you?” “Do you know?” Multiple interpretations are possible, but for this occasion I cite the assessment of John Holbert, who speaks directly to the issues we are addressing here:

God preaches a poor sermon, not because of poor content but because of poor style. God simply does not take with any seriousness the receptive position of the divine audience. Like too many modern preachers, God does not pay careful enough attention to the context and audience of the address, and consequently it falls on unwilling ears.⁶

Mark Twain’s essay, “Thoughts of God,” adds stinging commentary:

It is plain that there is one moral law for heaven and another for the earth. The pulpit assures us that wherever we see suffering and sorrow which we can relieve and do not do it, we sin, heavily. *There was never yet a case of suffering or sorrow, which God could not relieve.* Does He sin, then? If He is the source of Morals he does – certainly nothing can be plainer than that, you will admit. Surely the Source of Law cannot violate law and stand unsmirched; surely the judge upon the bench cannot forbid crime and then revel in it himself unrepentant. Nevertheless we have this curious spectacle: daily the trained parrot in the pulpit gravely delivers himself of these ironies, which he has acquired at second-hand and adopted without examination, to a trained congregation which accepts them without examination, and neither the speaker nor the hearer laughs at himself⁷

Job had asked whether there was justice in this world; can seven sons and three daughters be killed “for no reason” and there be no outrage in heaven, no outcry on earth (cf. 16:18-19)? God’s first response evades the question with a sheer assertion of reality. An unfathomable cosmic design provides the foundation for a seemingly amoral symbiosis of order and chaos. There are stars and thunder, mud and ice, lionesses feeding cubs with maternal care and careless ostriches leaving their eggs in the dirt. The warhorse lusts for battle, while vultures wait to feed on human corpses. This speech about cosmic design reveals the Creator’s pride; whereas Genesis merely reports that God’s creation is “very good,” the Voice from the Whirlwind speaks of creation’s beauty and wonder. But of justice, God says not a word. To Job’s questions about the moral order that *ought* to be in the world, God responds by declaring simply the way the world *is*. To be charitable, such a response may not be kitsch exactly, but one cannot help but wonder if God has not missed the point. Like Voltaire’s Dr. Pangloss, God seems to be saying that what is is what ought to be, that this is indeed the best of all possible worlds. An earthquake in Lisbon may leave innocent bodies strewn everywhere, but, as Pangloss would say, “[A]ll is for the best. For if there’s a volcano at Lisbon, it couldn’t be anywhere else. For it’s impossible for things not to be where they are. For all is well.”⁸

All is for the best? All is well? As Holbert notes, even God seems to be “disappointed in God’s own performance in the first speech... Job cannot, will not, hear such things [God’s parade of wonders] in such a way. And so, God speaks again, because God *must* speak again.”⁹

God’s second response to Job (40:6-41:34) addresses, at long last, Job’s questions about justice. At the start of the speech, the rhetoric is much the same as in the first. God summons Job to a dialogue—“I will question you, you declare to me” (40:7; cf. 38:3)—a dialogue that once again appears to begin with impossible questions. Here, however, God follows these questions with a series of imperatives to Job that seem genuinely to invite a response, an engagement that goes beyond the silence to which Job had retreated after God’s first speech (40:4-5). The summons is for Job to understand and to enact, if he can, the very justice he demands from God. If Job can pursue justice with godlike *power* (v.9a, “an arm like God”), *words* (v.9b, “thunder with a voice like [God’s]”), if he has the courage to live into the *majesty*, *dignity*, and *glory* of having been created as God’s near-equal (v.10; cf. Job 7:17 and Ps 8:4-5), and if Job can respond with *righteous anger* when the wicked presume they can abuse others without penalty (vv.11-13), then God will acknowledge that Job’s quest for justice is both principled and effective.

As if to provide a concrete illustration of what such creaturely nobility looks like, God directs Job’s attention to Behemoth and Leviathan, two liminal creatures whose attributes place them somewhere between mere earthly creatures and supernatural figures that belong to the world of myth and legend.¹⁰ Behemoth, “the first of the great acts of God,” is a creature of extraordinary strength and power (40:16-18); when confronted by aggression and violence, it stands its ground and trusts in its own God-given resources. To be sure, God can best Behemoth, if necessary, but no earthly creature can dictate its movements or frighten it into submission. “Look at Behemoth,” God says to Job, “which I made just as I made you” (40:13). When Job looks at Behemoth, he should learn something about himself.

Leviathan functions as a similar model for Job. No one can domesticate this

creature by forcing it into a covenant of “soft words” (41:3-4). Instead, when it opens its mouth, it sends forth fire and light, smoke and flames, phenomena elsewhere associated not only with the strong and compelling presence of ancient Near Eastern deities but also with YHWH. It is speech that demands respect, not disregard. If Job is looking for an exemplar of what it means “to look on all who are proud and bring them low” (40:12), he need look no farther than Leviathan, a creature that “surveys everything that is lofty” and rules like a “king over all who are proud” (41:34).

Job responds to God’s second speech by saying that he now “sees” more about God, and presumably more about the requisite of “justice” in God’s design for the world, than he did before (42:5). Preachers may find it useful to hit the “pause” button at this point, suspending consideration of Job’s enigmatic last words in 42:6, in order to create space for reflection on what God’s second “sermon” adds to this story.

To seed this reflection, let me begin by returning to Archibald MacLeish’s 1955 sermon: “How can we believe in our lives unless we can believe in God, and how can we believe in God unless we can believe in the justice of God?” MacLeish answers his own ruminations by arguing that God needs Job’s loyalty, Job’s inextinguishable love, in order to be God. Without Job’s love, precisely in the face of innocent suffering, “God does not exist as God, only as creator, and love is the one thing not even God Himself can command.” MacLeish explicates as follows:

It is for this reason that God, at the end of the poem, answers Job not in the language of justice but in the language of beauty and power and glory, signifying that it is not because He is just but because He is God that he deserves His creature’s adoration....

The principal concern, then, according to MacLeish is love, not justice:

To speak of “justice” is to demand something for ourselves and to ask something of life, to require that we be treated according to our dues. But love, as Saint Paul told the Corinthians, does not “seek her own” (1 Cor. 13:5). Love creates even God, for how else have we come to Him, any of us, but through love?¹¹

MacLeish’s humanistic reading of Job has been widely criticized, perhaps rightly so. It is the case that MacLeish seems to account only for God’s first speech, God’s reiteration of realism, but not for God’s second speech, which is certainly a summons to consider whether and to what extent realism must be leavened with justice. Even so, MacLeish is not the only interpreter to propose that God’s creation cannot be all that God expects and desires without the contributions of human beings.

Throughout this presentation, I have been working along the edges of Susan Neiman’s search for “moral clarity” in the Book of Job, what she refers to as the conjunction between God’s “is” and Job’s “ought.”¹² “Am I wrong,” God asks Job, “because you are right?” Neiman suggests that we should not interpret this as necessarily an either-or question. By reminding Job of the reality of the world, God affirms that the world is full of forces we cannot tame, which means that life itself is a gift. And if life itself is a gift, then the more Job participates in it, through grace and struggle, then the more he shows his thanks to God. Telling it like it is is a good

and necessary thing; God is “right,” not wrong, to reiterate realism. But Job is also “right” to insist that “the moral order that comes from human reason needs to be in the world as well.”¹³ In other words, both God and Job are right; both speak truth: “One tells it like it is, one tells it like it should be.”¹⁴ Neiman unfolds the consequences of such a discernment in this way:

If Job speaks truth, as God admits, the truth may be this one: There is no moral order in the world as it is, and there ought to be some. If God speaks truth, as Job admits, it may be to say that creating moral order in the world is just what we’re meant to give back to it. If there’s going to be reason in the world, it is we who have to put it there.

The book of Job’s most important message is that morality is neither a divine category nor one reflected in nature; morality is — ought to be — human.¹⁵

Moral simplicity, like kitsch, is easy to come by. It requires nothing more than simplistic assertions about the world and God, like those the friends espouse, which are painfully uninformed by experience, like the “trained parrot[s] in the pulpit” of whom Mark Twain writes, who “gravely deliver [themselves] of ironies, which they have acquired second-hand and adopted without examination.” Neither the friends nor “trained parrots” can speak “what is right” about God (42:7, 8), because they trust in the inertia of dogma; what they offer in response to the gift of the complexity of life is a “form of ingratitude.”¹⁶

Moral clarity, on the other hand, is always difficult to obtain. It requires making complex distinctions between knotty ethical problems. It means working to make sense of things that are nonsensical; it means seeing things we do not want to see, knowing things we do not want to acknowledge. And it almost always means deciding on a course of action without ever knowing fully if it is right. In sum, “human attempts to construct moral order are always precarious” precisely because they are human attempts. As Neiman puts it, “Moments of moral clarity are rare in life, and they are exceedingly precious. They usually follow upon hours – years – of moral confusion; they seldom arrive all at once or definitively; and they are never accompanied by a lifetime guarantee.”¹⁷

Job did not need God to persuade him that as a mere mortal he is but a small cog in the vast machinery of the cosmos. He is but one person, his sufferings, however horrendous, however unjust, are the experiences of one person. Even so, negotiating the world with the frail and always flawed moral reasoning of a mere human is all that Job can do. It is precisely what God has created him to do.

“What are human beings, that you make so much of them?” (Job 7:17), Job asks. Before God spoke, the question conveyed lament, the deadening conviction that human beings are no more than targets for the exercise of raw, divine power. After God spoke, and especially after God directed Job’s attention to Behemoth and Leviathan, Job undergoes a cognitive shift, “not a change of heart, but a change of mind. He ‘sees’ God freshly and understands something about the divine nature” that he had not known before.¹⁸ The text is mute on exactly what Job saw in the whirlwind, but like Job, preachers are summoned to gird up their loins and “declare” what they have learned from immersion in this text.

Two primary lessons may be suggested: 1) relationship with God is not “an automated interaction with a unidimensional deity obsessed with conformity and obedience. God is more complex, complicated, and inscrutable than humans can imagine;” 2) Job’s fidelity to God is not blind and uninformed; it is driven by a longing for moral clarity, by an irrepressible yearning to know and understand “things too wonderful” (*nipla’ot*; Job 42:3), things beyond complete human comprehension but not beyond the human aspiration to perform (cf. Deut 30:11-20). As William Scott Green puts it, “Job’s insistence on God’s justice yields unremitting demand for explanation that forces the deity to speak, to reveal himself in unexpected ways. Job draws God into a conversation about the divine self and makes cognition into a religious act.”¹⁹

Preaching Job’s God is a summons to preach as adults, not as children, as those who understand that the way the world is is always and necessarily leavened with real-life experience that causes us to yearn and strive for what ought to be, with God and when necessary against God. Real grown-ups, like Job, will insist that we stand ready to call any of our teachers, including God, into question.²⁰ As Nieman puts it, “If the alternative is inertia, outrage against injustice may keep [us] alive.”²¹

Notes

1 Archibald MacLeish, “The Book of Job,” (Farmington, Conn: First Church of Christ, 1955), reprinted as “God Has Need of Man,” in N. Glatzer, *The Dimensions of Job: A Study and Selected Readings* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 278. Subsequent references are to the edition of the sermon in Glatzer.

2 Ibid., 283.

3 For exegetical details here and throughout this essay, see Samuel E. Balentine, *Job* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary, 2006).

4 Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. I am indebted to Susan Neiman, *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grown-Up Idealists* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 422-437, for this way of framing the issue.

5 William Kennedy, *Chango’s Beads and Two-Tone Shoes* (New York: Viking Press, 2011).

6 John Holbert, *Preaching Job* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1999), 131.

7 Mark Twain, “Thoughts on God,” *The Oxford Book of Essays*. Chosen and edited by J. Gross (Oxford: OUP, 1991), 268-269.

8 Voltaire, *Candide*, trans. L. Blair (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), 30; cf. Nieman, *Moral Clarity*, 425.

9 John C. Holbert, *Preaching Job* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 1999), 132.

10 C. Newsom, “The Book of Job,” NIB, Vol.4 (1996), 615; idem, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 248.

11 MacLeish, “The Book of Job,” 285.

12 Neiman, *Moral Clarity*.

13 Ibid., 427.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., 429, 430.

16 Ibid., 431.

17 Ibid., 433.

18 William S. Green, “Stretching the Covenant: Job and Judaism,” *Review and Expositor* 99 (2002), 575.

19 Ibid., 576. This entire paragraph, even when not quoting directly, is informed by Green’s cogent assessment of the whirlwind speeches.

20 Neiman, *Moral Clarity*, 437.

21 Ibid., 431.