

The Word from the Whales

Job 12:7-10

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On day seven of the 2012 Ecumenical Lenten Carbon Fast, Jim Antal, conference minister for the United Church of Christ in Massachusetts, issued a call to worship leaders. His advice for preachers in particular was that within two to three years, every third or fourth sermon should address issues of climate change and ecology. Otherwise, as he surmised, in about ten to fifteen years, every sermon will have to focus on grief.¹

Today we'll be hearing from the Book of Job. Job's story is familiar because it is a story about what it is to be human, the glory and the vulnerability of it, the blessing and the curse, the thin line between innocence and guilt, understanding and bewilderment, appreciation for the gift of life, and despair in the face of its inscrutability.

The comedian Louis C.K. has a popular bit in which he points out the absurdity of how when we get off of an airplane, our first instinct seems to be to complain. Here we are, hurtling spectacularly through the atmosphere, suspended gracefully between heaven and earth, moving quicker than any other creature can move from one place to another, and yet still we're complaining about not having enough leg room, about being ten minutes delayed, about having the internet crash momentarily, or even worse, being without it for a bit, and all the while here we are sitting safely, life vest under our seat. Oh and by the way, we're in the sky! His punch line: "Everything's amazing and nobody's happy."²

The story of Job, however, begins just a step before that sentiment. For Job initially everything was amazing, and he was happy. "Blameless and upright" is what the text says, and so God blessed Job with "seven sons and three daughters, with seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred oxen, five hundred donkeys," such that we're told how "this man was the greatest of all the people of the east."

Well, soon enough Job would count himself among the "nobody's happy" crowd, for it wasn't long before all the blessings that supported him started to disappear rapidly: the family, the livestock, the land, his own body. It's as if the environment that sustained him in a state of happiness disintegrated and eventually broke down.

The bulk of the story then involves Job trying to make sense of the devastation that visited him. To this end, three friends travel from afar to be with him. First they sit together in silence for seven days, sharing deeply in Job's grief. Then Job decides to break the silence, cursing the day of his birth and railing against the indifference of the universe. A series of theological dialogues ensues, first between Job and his friends and finally between Job and God as God speaks from out of the whirlwind.

The friends view Job's personal loss largely as a problem of moral reasoning, and like us when we're faced with a problem, especially another person's problem, they seek a quick solution. They attempt to explain away the enigma of Job's situation. "It's because you must have done something wrong," they say. "Everything happens for a reason." Eventually, under the pressure of the debate, Job and his friends fall into the all-too-familiar pattern of talking completely past one another, becoming further entrenched in their own myopic perspectives and ideologies.

The friends' arguments are unhelpful to the point of testing Job's faith in the goodness of life and in the Creator who makes all things. Our text for today comes at a critical moment when Job finds his faith renewed, and interestingly, he finds it renewed by turning away from the terms of the human debate, away from the human tendency to argue about and control and explain all things, and turning instead towards the natural world, turning with reverence and humility towards the other-than-human and the more-than-human world of the earth and the diversity (and wisdom) of its living things. And Job said, "But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; speak to the earth, and it will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the LORD has done all this? In God's hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being."

People of faith throughout history have been quick to turn to the Creator by turning first towards creation, renewing faith in God through renewing faith in the goodness and beauty of life. Today, however, when something like Job's grief visits us and when like Job we turn to the earth to be renewed, we can find ourselves turning from one place of grief to another.

We turn to the animals, and we hear about their rapid disappearance during this Sixth-Holocene extinction event. We speak to the earth and hear of the strain that we're putting it under; we hear it sigh that so much beauty is departing from its stage. We speak to the sky, and it responds with a climate full of tumult and confusion. When it comes to the grief that we should be feeling now about climate change and the state of the earth, we seem to be in something like the position of Job and his friends, hedged in by the threat of collapse and stuck in an endless quagmire of debate, our faith in ourselves and our future tested.

A couple of summers ago, I spent a day in Madrid and visited the Prado. The old cityscape, with its mixture of Renaissance, Neo-Gothic, and Neoclassical design, complemented beautifully the play of Mediterranean sun on white clouds and blue sky. I entered the museum feeling rather optimistic, buoyed by the energy of the people and inspired by the awesome works of human nature fully on display in the city's architecture. I had come especially to see the paintings, and out of all the masterpieces that are housed in the Prado, there was one in particular that captivated me. Titled "Quarrel with Clubs," it comes from the bleak, haunting last series of paintings by Francisco Goya, the series known as his "Black Paintings." Seeing the painting reminded me of a professor's highlighting this image as a prophetic statement on where we stood in terms of the climate change debate.³ I looked deeply into the painting, trying to remember or imagine what he might have meant.

The lesson is pretty straightforward. The painting depicts two men mid-swing about to pummel one another with clubs. We see that they're both buried knee-deep in a type of sand pit, and we see that they seem to be sinking such that the harder these two fight against one another, the quicker they'll sink into the pit. This is not a fight or flight situation, but a fight to the death. In terms of color, the foreground matches the tragic scene with its dark tones and cavernous shadows, but one of the most eerie and unsettling things is that the background appears far brighter and more optimistic. If it weren't for the men in the scene, this would appear to be a rather peaceful and attractive landscape, with a blue and white sky not unlike the sky on that summer day in Madrid.

When I look at the painting now, what I see is that we've been placed amid a landscape of staggering beauty, but like the men fighting with elubs, like Job and his friends, we have this tendency, perhaps especially in the ecological debate, to turn away from the rest of creation and to face off, human vs. human, in an endless argument, creating for ourselves a quagmire which, when foregrounded, has the ability to mar the entire landscape. When I look at the painting now, what I see is an honest representation of someone who has lost faith in the goodness of life. I see the comic's punch line that "everything's amazing and nobody's happy." When I look at it now, I see Job in that moment right before he says, "But ask the animals and they'll tell you, and the fish of the sea will declare to you."

A few years ago *The New York Times Magazine* published an intriguing essay titled "Watching Whales Watching Us." As the title implies, this piece explores the "ever-evolving relationship between humans and whales."⁴ The author had heard that something interesting was happening between humans and gray whales in the San Ignacio lagoons off Baja's western coast, and so he traveled there with a marine biologist to see first hand what was going on.

The San Ignacio lagoons are important as the winter and spring harbor for these whales; it's where they give birth to and nurse their young for a few months before heading north again towards the Bering Sea. This yearly pattern meant that these lagoons used to be prime whale-hunting grounds, so productive in fact that as recently as 75 years ago, the gray whale was nearly hunted out of existence. These whales never accepted the hunt without a fight, such that the grays once earned themselves the Leviathan-like nickname "hardheaded devil fish." In 1937 an international ban was placed on hunting the gray whale. But since these mammals can live as long as 100 years, there are still whales swimming those waters with harpoon scars marking their backs, bearing a history of violence on their bodies. It turns out that it's these very same whales with the harpoon scars that are now doing something new and quite extraordinary. These whales have not only stopped attacking human vessels, but are in fact seeking out connection with us, turning the tables and pursuing with curiosity the whale-watching boats instead of being curiously pursued; even entertaining the human onlookers with spectacular breaching displays, sending their impossibly huge bodies careening from water into sky with such gravity-defying grace; even shepherding their young and vulnerable calves right up next to the whale-watchers; even gently holding their massive, harpoon-scared heads inches from these boats and looking up at these people, beholding us with their immense eyes; even letting or inviting us to extend a hand and touch them. A type of blessing from one creature of extraordinary intelligence to another.

Apparently, the word from the whales is that for us humans, something like ecological forgiveness is possible. Apparently, the word from the whales is that if we change our tune, if we relent from our attack on the things of nature, the things of nature will respond in turn, and even those places left most scarred will forgive us. Apparently, the word from the whales is that creation waits with eager longing for the day when we'll seek communication and relationship with it rather than control and manipulation. Apparently, the word from the whales confirms the wisdom of Job when he says, "Ask the animals and they will teach you—the fish of the sea, and they will declare to you; ask the birds of the air, and they will tell you...that the hand of the LORD has done all this."

A few days before Madrid and the Prado, I found myself in the Louvre in Paris, captivated by a different painting—the image of “St. Francis Preaching to the Birds” by the Early Italian Renaissance artist Giotto. This painting, glowing vividly with its gold inlay, depicts perhaps the most celebrated event in the life of this celebrated saint of the church. Legend has it that after walking away from the life of wealth and power that awaited him as a merchant in Assisi and after turning towards a life of voluntary poverty and simplicity modeled on the life of Jesus, St. Francis became an itinerant preacher of the gospel, and famously, was wont to wander from the road and preach to other creatures, as when he told his companions, “You shall await me here on the road, and I will go preach to the birds, my sisters.” In this famous sermon, Francis called upon the birds to sing God’s praises at all times and in all places. Like Jesus did when he said to “consider the birds of the air,” St. Francis called upon his avian friends not to worry about the future, about reaping and sowing, but instead to trust in the abundance that God will provide. He reminded them that “clearly your Creator loves you,” and he called on them to beware of “the sin of ingratitude” and so to “be ever mindful to give praise to God.”⁵ What strikes me about Giotto’s painting is the way both St. Francis and the birds lean towards one another for this event. With this leaning, there seems to be a type of mutual communication happening between them, and indeed given how vocal birds are, it’s harder to imagine this bird-congregation remaining silent than it is to imagine them chirping and singing back to St Francis, a type of human-avian call and response.

So here we have Goya’s “Quarrel with Clubs,” and we have Giotto’s “St. Francis Preaching to the Birds.” On the one hand, we have a picture of what it’s like to lose faith in the goodness of life and what it’s like to mar the beauty of creation; but so too on the other, we have a picture of what it looks like to relate to the creatures of this earth in a beautiful, mutually enhancing way.

As human beings it appears that we have a choice. We can either seek control, or we can seek communication with the other-than-human world. We can hunt the whales towards extinction, or we can watch them curiously as they watch us curiously. We can let the birds disappear into silence, or we can preach good news to them as they preach good news to us. Job says to “ask the animals and speak to the earth”; he says to “ask the fish and to speak to the birds.” From the whales, we hear a word about forgiveness. From St. Francis and the birds, we hear that gratitude is the beginning of wisdom and that praise is how we best respond to this reality of grace within which we stand. Forgiveness, gratitude, wisdom, praise—creation waits with eager longing.

Notes

¹ This 2012 Ecumenical Lenten Carbon fast was a project of NEREM (New England Regional Environmental Ministries). C.f., macucc.org/carbonfast.

² C.f., the 2009 Conan O’Brien Show interview with Louis CK, <http://www.criticalcommons.org/Members/fsustavros/clips/louis-ck-technology/view>

³ Michael S. Hogue, “Global Warming and Religious Stickfighting,” from a public lecture presented at the University of Chicago, 25 January 2007.

⁴ Charles Siebert, “Watching Whales Watching Us,” *The New York Times Magazine*, 8 July 2009.

⁵ Ugolino di Monte Santa Maria, *The Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi*, trans. W. Heywood, (New York: Vintage Spiritual Classics, 1998), 36-37.