

God's Response to Job
Psalm 8, Job 38:1-7, 34-41
November 15, 2009

A few days after Hurricane Andrew struck in 1992, a 7-year old girl asked her father why God let it happen. Andrew's 160-mph winds had ripped the roof from the Hispanic family's home while they huddled in a stairwell.

Edgar, the girl's father, found himself wanting to defend God. "I didn't want her to think badly of God—but I had no words," he said. "I finally said, 'I don't understand why this happened. But sometimes you have to lose the roof to see the sky.'"

Today is the third of four Sundays exploring the story of Job. Job has suffered the loss of his family, possessions, and servants. He feels this excruciating experience given to him is unjust and undeserved. Job has been demanding an audience with God so that Job can defend himself. After chapters of debate and condemnation from Job's friends and anguishing pleas from Job himself, God speaks. Job has been longing for an answer to the question we all ask at one time or another in life, "Why?"

When God finally answers Job, God does not answer that question. Instead God launches into his own poetic and stunning array of questions. We heard a few of them in our scripture reading. There are a total of sixty questions asked by God. Here are a few more from Eugene Peterson's translation, *The Message*:

"Have you ever traveled to where snow is made,
seen the vault where hail is stockpiled...?
Can you find your way to where lightning is launched,
or to the place from which the wind blows?
Who do you suppose carves canyons
for the downpours of rain, and charts
the route of thunderstorms
That bring water to unvisited fields,
deserts no one ever lays eyes on,
Drenching the useless wastelands
so they're carpeted with wildflowers and grass?
And who do you think is the father of rain and dew,
the mother of ice and frost?
You don't for a minute imagine
these marvels of weather just happen, do you?" (38:22-30).

Imagine being given a large blank canvas and a big box of crayons. The assignment is to make a picture of yourself in the universe. Ponder in your mind's eye what you would draw on your canvas. Chances are that most folks would not

draw themselves as a tiny fleck of flesh hanging on to one edge of the paper. Most of us would most likely place ourselves in front and center, with slightly smaller suns and planets spinning in the depths of space behind us. We can't help ourselves. We humans tend to think of ourselves, more specifically, my individual life, as the center of the universe. If asked to sketch a timeline of our lives, most of us would probably begin with the day of our own birth. How many of us would think to begin with the appearance of the first hominid in Africa? It is so tempting to put ourselves at the center of the universe.

God asks Job if he knows when mountain goats give birth. That was long before Google could easily inform him that goat kids are born in late May and early June! Job does not know, but God knows such intimate details of every living species created. Job is suddenly impressed by how little he really does know. God mentions many creatures from the ibis to the rooster, the lioness to the raven, the ostrich to the buffalo. In the entire long list of divinely made creatures, not a single human being is mentioned.

God's speech confronts Job and us with the truth that humans are not at the center of the universe. Barbara Brown Taylor says, "One of the worst things about pain is the unavoidable egocentricity of it....Whether the pain is mental, physical, or both, the place where you feel it is the center of the universe, and it can be very difficult to avoid feeling picked on."ⁱ It's so easy to throw ourselves a pity party. I've frequently caught myself doing that, wondering why other people are acting out at me when I don't believe I've committed a mortal sin.

God calls, even commands, us to step outside of our own little self-centered universe. Broaden our perspective. As Edgar said to his daughter, "Sometimes we need to lose the roof in order to see the sky." There is far more to the world than our small plot on earth. It doesn't mean that God is not interested in us; God is interested in and invested in it all. God delights in life in all its myriad forms. As God's people, God desires that we too love and protect the various forms of life and see our species as one among many.

Matthew Fox suggests that "cosmology – beholding the awe and terror of the universe – leads to clear thinking, to seeing things in perspective....Without a cosmology, our world is too small. If our world is too small, so too are our souls."ⁱⁱ

When we dare to step out of the center of the universe, we open ourselves to an encounter with the Divine Presence. This is essentially what Job experiences. God's questions shift Job's perspective. His healing is not so much a matter of sin or blame as it is of perspective. He steps out of the center and allows God to be in the center. Freed from the prison of self, God becomes his reference point. There at the center God keeps the pulse on all of creation, including, but not limited to,

Job. With God at the center, Job becomes open to an experience of the Holy One. God becomes the teacher and Job is the student. God is in control and Job is not.

Richard Rohr suggests that “Allowing God to be our Lord...is always a process of a lifetime, a movement toward union that will always feel like a loss of self-importance and autonomy. The private ego will resist and rationalize in every way it can. My experience is that, apart from suffering, failure, humiliation and pain, none of us will naturally let go of our self-sufficiency. We will think that our story is just about *us*. It isn’t.”ⁱⁱⁱ

When William Sloane Coffin was an undergraduate student at Yale, three of his friends were killed in a car accident when the driver fell asleep at the wheel. At the funeral, Coffin was sickened by the piety of the priest as he spoke the words from Job: “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (1:21). Coffin was so outraged that he even considered tripping the priest as he processed up the aisle of the church. As he was preparing to do so, a small voice asked him, “What part of the phrase, Coffin, are you objecting to?” He says that he thought it was the second part: “The Lord hath taken away.”

“Then suddenly it dawned on me that I was protesting the first: ‘The Lord gave.’ It hit me hard that it was not my world; that at best we were all guests. And ‘The Lord gave’ was a statement against which all the spears of human pride have to be hurled and shattered.”^{iv}

One truth we learn from Job is that life is not just about us nor our suffering and hardships. Life is far larger than our suffering. There are creatures unknown to us and a universe about which we know relatively little. It is often more helpful to change the why question, which may never be answered, to what. What is God doing to me and through me during my hardships? How is God present in the midst of my heartache? How are the designs of God still at work in the world serving as the force of life and well-being? Life is far larger than me.

A second truth is that God is God and we are not. We are creature; God is Almighty Creator. We stand in awe before the wondrous works God has created, from a newborn baby to a hippopotamus to a daffodil. From this perspective we are overcome with humility, recognizing our lowly place in the universe. We realize our interdependence with all the creature of the universe. We are struck with gratitude for the very gift of being alive.

A third lesson from Job is that sometimes we have to wrestle with God to understand God more deeply. The poet Miguel de Unamuno said it well, “Those who believe they believe in God, but without passion in the heart, without anguish of mind, without uncertainty, without doubt and even at times without despair, believe only in the idea of God, and not in God himself.” As Job discovered, oftentimes it is through the struggle that our relationship with God is deepened.

Suffering happens. Oftentimes there are no answers. Nicholas Wolterstorff's son fell to his death on the side of a mountain. There is no answer to explain the "why" of a father's loss. Yet walking through that experience, Wolterstorff writes, "I shall look at the world through tears. Perhaps I shall see things that dry-eyed I could not."^v

May God grant us the perspective and humility to see ourselves as creatures, always cared for by a loving, awesome Creator who is at the center of the universe.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, "On Not Being God," *Review and Expositor*, 99, Fall 2002, pp. 610-611.

ⁱⁱ Matthew Fox, *Creation Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), pp. 147-150.

ⁱⁱⁱ Richard Rohr, *Job and the Mystery of Suffering* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), p. 158.

^{iv} William Sloane Coffin, *Letters to a Young Doubter* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), pp. 107-109.

^v Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 26.

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