

Proper 7 B
Job 38:1-11
June 23, 2024

All That We Don't Know
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Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb—when I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped?’”

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This morning’s text from the book of Job addresses, or rather, it fails to address one of the big questions that’s confronted humanity since its very beginnings: why do bad things happen to good people? Job is, by all accounts, “good people.” And yet, he loses everything – his wealth, his family, even his health – but he does not die. Instead, he endures, watching as everything he loves turns to dust.

In Job’s day, it was believed that suffering was the result of sin and blessing was a byproduct of benevolence. For Job’s contemporaries, there could be only one possible reason for his suffering. Sin. Like good friends, Job’s try to make him feel bad and see the error in his

ways. However, try as they might, they cannot convince Job of his wrongdoing. Instead, Job maintains his innocence and calls God to stand trial and give an account of Job's crimes. But God is not so easily baited.

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” boomed the divine voice from a whirlwind. “Who measured it, laid it out, and set the cornerstone? Who shut the sea in its boundaries, made the sky and the blanket of darkness? Surely, Job, if you question me, you must know!”

Though today's reading ends here, God is just warming up and continues a further three chapters, recounting many impressive displays of heavenly dominion. When the divine defense finally rests, Job, humbled, repents for ever questioning God. Job's fortunes are restored, his family is repopulated, and he lives a long and healthy life. The end.

Considered by many “scholars to be the finest wisdom text of the Jewish and Christian canons,”¹ the book of Job has intrigued hearers for almost 3,000 years. Its simple prose and profound poetry have earned it a place among the major works of world literature.² And the honest way in which the book wrestles with one of the big questions of human existence, continues to provide fodder for philosopher's, theologians, artists, and lay people. Ultimately, though, the book of Job does not provide much of an answer. Some things simply are. And some things will always be unknown.

While the divine voice in Job is a master class in tactful evasion – never addressing the bigger question about innocent suffering – it follows up with questions of its own for Job. At its core, the book of Job is about asking the big questions, the unknowable and unanswerable questions,

¹ *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2003, pg. 703.

² *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, pg. 735.

with honesty and integrity and exploring them, interrogating them in the context of an authentic life of faith and trusted community. It's not ultimately about answers. The book of Job is all about the questions.

Asking questions is intrinsic to our shared human experience. Just spend 5 minutes with a four-year-old and you'll know what I mean. But equally intrinsic is our common aversion to uncertainty, our fundamental need for answers. When we ask a question, we immediately go about seeking its answer in order to eliminate the distress caused by uncertainty, by the unknown. Psychologists call this "cognitive closure." In our pursuit of cognitive closure, there is a risk that we will find, accept or create, an answer to our question that seems plausible to us, but is, in fact, incorrect.³

In the case of Job's question about why bad things happen to good people, theologians have speculated much over the millennia. Some determine that God isn't completely good and isn't concerned with our notions of justice. Others posit that God isn't completely powerful and, restrained by the natural laws of the cosmos, God isn't able to keep the bad things from happening. Others suggest that God isn't all-knowing and therefore isn't able to stop an evil God isn't aware of in the first place. And still others suggest that if bad things happen to good people, then God doesn't exist at all. The problem with all of these solutions is that they are absolute. Once arrived at, there is little room for further questioning and even less room for other answers. Cognitive closure achieved.

And yet, there is so much that could be gained by sitting with all that we don't know, by asking and then living with the questions. One educator and author says it this way: "Questioning takes the familiar and makes it

³ Maria Konnikova. "Why We Need Answers," *Newyorker.com*, April 30, 2013:
<https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/why-we-need-answers>.

mysterious again, thus removing the comfort of ‘knowing.’” She goes on to say that:

Our desire to question is innate and needs to be preserved and nurtured starting from early childhood. Children naturally question the causes behind everything they see. Before we are done explaining why the grass is green and why the sky is blue, our children are ready to inquire into the deepest mysteries of life, the mind, space and time. But childhood curiosity almost invariably dwindles over time.⁴

And that is precisely what the logic of the book of Job defies. Curiosity is good. Questions are good. Seeking answers is good. Arriving at definitive, demonstrable, indisputable answers – that, on the other hand, isn’t the be-all and end-all we too often let ourselves think. Especially in matters of belief.

Religion, faith, spiritual life, and trusted community provide an alternative, a compliment if you will, to the rigid answer-seeking of scientific inquiry. If, that is, we can allow ourselves the space to explore and the grace to hold the “answers” we discover gently. Author Barry Lopez reminds us that “[t]o allow mystery, which is to say to yourself, ‘There could be more, there could be things we don’t understand,’ is not to damn knowledge. It is to take a wider view. It is to permit yourself an extraordinary freedom: someone else does not have to be wrong in order that you may be right.”⁵

⁴ Julia Brodsky. “Why Questioning Is The Ultimate Learning Skill,” Forbes.com, December 29, 2020: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/juliabrodsky/2021/12/29/why-questioning-is-the-ultimate-learning-skill/>.

⁵ Barry Lopez. *Of Wolves and Men*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1979.

And so, dear friends, may we ask questions and seek answers and sit with uncertainty and allow for mystery. As my favorite poet Mary Oliver once wrote:

*Truly, we live with mysteries too marvelous
to be understood.*

*How grass can be nourishing in the
mouths of lambs...
How two hands touch and the bonds will
never be broken.
How people come, from delight or the
scars of damage,
to the comfort of a poem.
Let me keep my distance, always, from those
who think they have the answers.*

*Let me keep company always with those who say
"Look!" and laugh in astonishment,
and bow their heads.⁶*

May it be so with us. Amen.

⁶ Mary Oliver. "Mysteries, Yes" from *Evidence: Poems*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2010.