

How Do You See Things?
by Rev. Michael R. Blackwood
The United Church of Broomfield
October 17, 2021

Job 38 (CEB) *within the text of the sermon*

Review:

Job – story, not factual

Story about theodicy – intended to help us with the challenging questions about God’s character in light of human suffering. “Why do bad things happen to good people / good things happen to bad people?”

The big questions:

Is God Just?

Does God in fact operate “the universe” on a principle of justice?

If not, then what does this say about God? About life and the world in which we live?

Last week, we were in chapter 23 and Job was gearing up to confront God about his suffering and God’s role in it all.

God is hiding from me....because if I could find God, I’d lay my case before Her and She’d see just how innocent and righteous I am – how all of this suffering is unfair for such an upright person such as me. But alas, I’m also fearful of God’s awe and greatness – I’m not sure I can do this...but I’m determined.

Today, we’re in chapter 38. So, we’ve jumped ahead another 15 chapters. What transpired in those 15 chapters?

- Having decided to take his complaint directly to God, Job continues to defend himself (to himself and to his friends) ...
 - *If God knows everything, why keep us in the dark?*
 - *There’s so much suffering and evil out there – “The wretched cry out for help and God does nothing, acts like nothing’s wrong” (24:12 MSG).*
 - *“There are people out there getting away with murder – stealing and lying and cheating” (24:2 MSG)*
- Bildad/friend steps in again – “God is fearsome ... how can a mere mortal presume to stand up to God?”(25:2,4 MSG) Who do you think you are?
- Job struggles in these chapters as he builds up his case because he wants to hope and believe that God is truly just. “What hope do the Godless have when God takes away their life” (27:8)?
 - *Job responds to Bildad: I am God’s child. Yes, God is fearsome, powerful, awesome, AND just!! BUT.... As it concerns me and the horrors that have befallen me, God is denying me rightful justice. With all of God’s magnificence, God **should** see the unfairness happening to me --- and being so powerful and awesome, God **should** not have allowed it to happen in the first place! I am innocent. Is it wrong to expect God to know that and stop it from happening? Doesn’t God love me?*
 - *Job finishes his defense and demands: “I’ve signed my name to my defense – let the Almighty One answer” (31:35 MSG)!*

- Elihu / younger and less “wise” friend who has mysteriously been present all along. He loses his tempers against Job AND the others and finally steps in to respond and defend God:
 - Like the other friends
 - God IS Just
 - God DOES run the world according to Justice
 - God always answers ----through the world around you, through life and experiences, through suffering as well as joy.
 - ***Different conclusion/possibility:***
 - It’s not punishment for past actions
 - Suffering is a warning to avoid future sin
 - OR because it builds character / teaches lessons.
 - I don’t know WHY you’re suffering, BUT – you are wrong to accuse God!

* I appreciate JOB

> Even though I know that I am not as righteous as Job was (and never will be), reading about him and his courage to confront God, help me to feel OK complaining ... sure it might be whining, sometimes over nothing, but being taught, being shown, being “given” the freedom ***in scripture*** to actually complain --- to grumble “to” God (and even “with” God) about *anything/everything including God*, even if we’re a little scared to confront God, is not only permissible, but encouraged.

Being right or wrong isn’t important; we not only GET TO, but it’s expected that we will complain It is beneficial because it puts us into dialogue and relationship with God. The trick is not staying there! We cannot ONLY play the “oh woe is me, my life is horrible song” all of the time. *Even if we believe it to be true!* We are more complex, diverse, and capable than that – we are made in the image of GOD after all.

> How fortunate that I CAN complain to God. To KNOW that God is ok with our complaining, questioning and even our confrontational attitudes...

> How blessed am I to know that God DOES listen and WANTS to hear from me and TALK with me... even if God doesn’t answer in the ways I want or expect.

God shows up. God addresses Job’s accusations that God is unjust and incompetent at running the universe. This brings us to our scripture reading for today:

- 38** ¹Then the Lord answered Job from the whirlwind:
²Who is this darkening counsel
 with words lacking knowledge?
³Prepare yourself ~~like a man~~;
 I will interrogate you, and you will respond to me.

The establishing of order

- ⁴Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations?
 Tell me if you know.
⁵Who set its measurements? Surely you know.
 Who stretched a measuring tape on it?
⁶On what were its footings sunk;
 who laid its cornerstone,
⁷ while the morning stars sang in unison

and all the divine beings shouted?
8 Who enclosed the Sea behind doors
when it burst forth from the womb,
9 when I made the clouds its garment,
the dense clouds its wrap,
10 when I imposed my limit for it,
put on a bar and doors
11 and said, "You may come this far, no farther;
here your proud waves stop"?
12 In your lifetime have you commanded the morning,
informed the dawn of its place
13 so it would take hold of earth by its edges
and shake the wicked out of it?
14 Do you turn it over like clay for a seal,
so it stands out like a colorful garment?
15 Light is withheld from the wicked,
the uplifted arm broken.

The vast beyond

16 Have you gone to the sea's sources,
walked in the chamber of the deep?
17 Have death's gates been revealed to you;
can you see the gates of deep darkness?
18 Have you surveyed earth's expanses?
Tell me if you know everything about it.
19 Where's the road to the place where light dwells;
darkness, where's it located?
20 Can you take it to its territory;
do you know the paths to its house?
21 You know, for you were born then;
you have lived such a long time!^[a]
22 Have you gone to snow's storehouses,
seen the storehouses of hail
23 that I have reserved for a time of distress,
for a day of battle and war?
24 What is the way to the place where light is divided up;
the east wind scattered over earth?

Meteorological facts

25 Who cut a channel for the downpours
and a way for blasts of thunder
26 to bring water to uninhabited land,
a desert with no human
27 to saturate dry wasteland
and make grass sprout?
28 Has the rain a father
who brought forth drops of dew?

29 From whose belly does ice come;
who gave birth to heaven's frost?
30 Water hardens like stone;
the surface of the deep thickens.
31 Can you bind Pleiades' chains
or loosen the reins of Orion?
32 Can you guide the stars
at their proper times,
lead the Bear with her cubs?
33 Do you know heaven's laws,
or can you impose its rule on earth?
34 Can you issue an order to the clouds
so their abundant waters cover you?
35 Can you send lightning so that it goes
and then says to you, "I'm here"?
36 Who put wisdom in remote places,
or who gave understanding to a rooster?^[a]
37 Who is wise enough to count the clouds,
and who can tilt heaven's water containers
38 so that dust becomes mud
and clods of dirt adhere?

Lion and raven

39 Can you hunt prey for the lion
or fill the cravings of lion cubs?
40 They lie in their den,
lie in ambush in their lair.
41 Who provides food for the raven
when its young cry to God,
move about without food?

God's response is amazing; from a whirlwind God gives Job a cosmic tour of everything (almost)... There are all these things that God is controlling, watching and observing at all times **and** since the beginning of time. Things that Job has never even considered, never even had the *idea* to even think about.

- AND YET, you Job have the gumption to question my abilities and insinuate that I, God, am incompetent?

And of course, God responds in that parental way that I always hated as a child – by responding to questions with questions.

Remember that Job and all of his friends come into this story with the basic assumption that God is just and God runs the world justly...that's what creates this opportunity for deeper engagement, when things don't seem to follow that assumption. With God's response to Job in our reading today, it makes Job, the friends and even us go deeper ...

Job - If you're going to assume anything - that you know how ***I, God, ought to run a moral and just world, first consider do you even have enough perspective in the first place?***

* Do we think that we even really know God?

* Do we think that we know “ENOUGH” (because clearly we don’t know everything)... about ALL OF CREATION AND THE UNIVERSE SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE BEGINNING...

* Do we think that we really have enough perspective with our limited selves and our limited time IN EXISTENCE that gives us the right to question the operation of ALL of creation? ... the right to question God? ... >>> (We think we do!)

In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* last week, author James Cone engaged theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and we learned how Niebuhr was passionate about justice, but just didn’t *quite* get it – his perspective wasn’t deep enough or broad enough, to see the connection between the cross and the lynching tree. This week, Cone engaged Martin Luther King Jr.

We began our reading this past week reflecting on Emmett Till, a 14-year child from Chicago, visiting family in Mississippi, who apparently whistled at a white woman and reportedly said, “bye baby”.... And for doing so, was abducted by two white men, “beaten beyond recognition, shot in the head, and thrown in the Tallahatchie River, ‘weighted down with a heavy gin fan” (66).

King, unlike Niebuhr

Senator John Lewis (15), unlike Niebuhr

Countless black men, unlike Niebuhr ... saw burning crosses, mob killings and lynchings of black men and children and thought, “that could’ve been me.”

King said, “Every time someone was killed, [I] knew it could have been [me]” (85).

The Cross and the Lynching Tree; these symbols send clear and complex messages, but also mysterious, salvific ones to which it is said only fools can relate or that can only be TRULY understood with perspective – perspective that usually comes from time and experience.

- “the symbol of the cross spoke to the lives of blacks because the likeness between the cross and the lynching tree created an eerie feeling of mystery and the supernatural” (75).
- “in their spiritual wrestling, black Christians experienced the weakness and power of God's love revealed in the cross - mysteriously saving them from loneliness and abandonment and the unspeakable violence by blood thirsty mobs” (75).
- “King's faith was defined by the mystery of divine salvation in the cross and by the belief that Jesus was the answer not only to the lynching tree but to whatever troubles black people faced” (85).

God asks Job a myriad of questions:

- Were you there when...?
- Do you know how?
- Have you felt...?
- Did you witness...?
- Can you...?

Job was so confident and ready to confront God because he thought he knew about God, the universe...

We, as white Americans, are too often reticent to continue studying and engaging in dialogue about race relations because we think we know about black Americans, about black life in Americans..."that was then, this is now"...

The reality is, we really don't "know." Yes, we may have knowledge, intellectual understanding, some experience ... but we fool ourselves into thinking that it's enough...or might ever be enough.

Before Job can understand ... speak to ... and offer critique ... about "what it means to be God"
Before we can understand ... speak to ... and offer critique ... about "what it means to be black in America"
We need to humble ourselves and remember that there is always "more perspective" possible.

The Grass is Always Greener on the Other Side

* This is a cliché we're all familiar with. We often look on other people, things and circumstances, longing for what other people have, THINKING that we know "the truth." But what we know is often simply a perception of reality. There is always more to the story because we rarely know all of it, we just think we do.

Job and his friends, were older and wiser – if anyone were to be able to figure out an answer to Job's suffering, it ought to have been them, right? They reflected on his suffering and reached two basic conclusions, either God is Just (justified suffering) or God is Unjust (unjust suffering). But then this mysterious, younger and seemingly "less wise," Elihu steps in to speak and offers a mysterious, foolish and apparently unwise third option – maybe suffering is not entirely bad, but possibly preemptively corrective and creative?

King said, "my personal trials have taught me the value of unmerited suffering, suffering could create bitterness and hate or one could seek to transform the suffering into a creative force." Though King's life experiences, his trials, the death threats and struggles, he was able to GAIN a perspective that seems foolish, naïve or downright strange.

How does one look at a cross or a lynching tree, both weapons of death and torment and see salvation...or "the ultimate expression of God's love for humanity" (85, 92)?

Where we see suffering, torture and death, whether it be upon a crucifixion cross or a lynching tree, can we imagine AND ACCEPT that God can see a creative force? Is it possible to gain SUCH perspective? Ever? That is a tough question to ask ourselves.

With any story or situation, it's best practice to stop and think, before we speak.
How much more important, especially with the big "life" and "existence" questions, is it to do the same thing?

There are some great quotes I want to share with you...

Sun Tzu = in the midst of chaos, there is also opportunity.

Aristotle = it is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.

Tommy Lee Jones to Will Smith (Men in Black) = "A thousand years ago, everybody knew the Earth was the center of the universe. Five hundred years ago, they knew the Earth was flat. Fifteen minutes ago, you knew we humans were alone on it. Imagine what you'll know tomorrow."

The questions God asks Job, we should ask ourselves. When we think we know it all...when we demand to be in complete control...when we begin to criticize, critique and demand because (...well, I know) ... we would

benefit ourselves to practice humility. Step back and consider our perspective. What do I *really* know? **CAN I really know EVERYTHING?**

In Cone's book, he says, "instead of attempting to explain the saving power of the cross rationally, black Christians recognized it as a mystery, beyond human understanding or control."

King said, "the most astounding fact about Christ's crucifixion is that it ... [is] the supreme revelation of God's love.... It is quite difficult to see the love of God in such a shameful tragedy" (85).

In responding to Job, God begins not with a direct answer, but with providing some perspective. Perhaps, it's because Job is incapable of understanding the direct answer. It's likely all humans will never understand. Perhaps the idea of innocent suffering is simply too difficult for us to comprehend and our best hope is gaining perspective through embracing the complexity and mystery that is our God.

Our journey with Job began with a reminder of hope. Last week we explored courage. And today, we have perspective. What is our perspective? Well, we're left with the reality that these are not easy questions, there are no easy answers (or maybe no answers at all), and these are certainly not easy discussions.

Will you keep asking questions?

Will you stop to listen?

Will you consider the unimaginable?

AMEN