

But You Didn't Answer the Question
The United Church of Broomfield
October 24, 2021

Job 40:3-3-5 NRSV

³ Job responded to the Lord:

⁴ Look, I'm of little worth. What can I answer you?

I'll put my hand over my mouth.

⁵ I have spoken once, I won't answer;
twice, I won't do it again.

Job 42:1-17 NRSV

42 Then Job answered the Lord:

² "I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

³ 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?'

Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.

⁴ 'Hear, and I will speak;
I will question you, and you declare to me.'

⁵ I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you;

⁶ therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes."

⁷ After the Lord had spoken these words to Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite: "My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. ⁸ Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams, and go to my servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has done." ⁹ So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and did what the Lord had told them; and the Lord accepted Job's prayer.

¹⁰ And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before. ¹¹ Then there came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and they ate bread with him in his house; they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him; and each of them gave him a piece of money^[a] and a gold ring. ¹² The Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; and he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys. ¹³ He also had seven sons and three daughters. ¹⁴ He named the first Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Keren-happuch. ¹⁵ In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job's daughters; and their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers. ¹⁶ After this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children's children, four generations. ¹⁷ And Job died, old and full of days.

Review:

Job – story, not factual

Theodicy – the question of human suffering and God’s character. “Why do bad things happen to good people?”

When we began four weeks ago, the basic questions that were asked at the beginning of the story of Job were, “Is God Just” and “Does God operate the universe on a principle of justice?” With today being our last week in Job (at least for the time being) what answers do we have to these questions?

After 37 chapters of Job’s suffering, questioning God’s abilities and fairness and Job’s friends explaining who, what and how God is...last week we got to chapter 38, and it was God’s turn to speak. God responded to Job’s demands for answers with questions, questions about all the universe and all of creation. It was a beautiful journey of the cosmos and God continued those questions into chapters 39, 40 and 41.

- * Were you there at the creation of the world, the sky, the stars and the sea?
- * Have you commanded sunrises, sunsets and the paths of darkness and light?
- * Do you know the birth, death, life cycles and inner workings of goats, donkeys, lions, ravens and every other creature...including Behemoth and Leviathan?

*** What do you know?**

- * Do you know GOD’S justice?
- * You THINK you know everything and while you may know some things, perhaps much, you don’t know (and will never know) everything.

So, what have you to say, Job?

I’m sorry. I spoke out of turn. I thought I knew Your ways, what was best for me (and everyone, actually), but I was wrong. I’ll be quiet and listen to you now.

In the presence of God, with nowhere else to turn, Job hears AND sees the errors of his hubris and his true ignorance of God. He acknowledges that he has neither God’s power nor God’s wisdom. After accusing God of creating a world of chaos, God showed Job the world as it really is: a place of order, but also of freedom and beauty, not centered on human beings, but also full of wild creatures Job never imagined.

Job is not the center of the universe. He knows that now. But he has a place; he has a role to play and he is prepared to do that, NOW.

This week in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* we explored these symbols through the lens of black artists - singers, musicians, writers and poets - and how they played an important role in helping the black community seek “out the meaning of the black experience in a world defined by white supremacy” (94).

Author Cone pointed out how black artists were able to do what “white theologians and clergy ignored ... and [what] black religious scholars and ministers merely alluded to: ... [they boldly showed how] in the United states the clearest image of the crucified Christ was the figure of an innocent black victim, dangling from a lynching tree” (93).

* Singer Billie Holiday took a horrifying image of lynched black bodies and sang a hauntingly beautiful song called *Strange Fruit*.

* Writers W.E.B. DuBois and Walter Everett Hawkins used their literary skills to create essays and poems that politicized the hypocrisy they saw regarding the savior that both whites and blacks followed, yet interpreted and understood so differently.

* Artists like E. Simms Campbell and Hale Woodruff, not only dared to draw Jesus in oppressed and slave-subjected positions, but as a black man - referencing Christ as a lynched victim. "Simply turning Jesus from white to black switched the visual signifiers, making him one with the body of lynched black people in America" (101).

Black artists took their imaginative and creative faith roles in order to provide a new interpretation for suffering blacks – one of hope, truth and dignity. They KNEW that God was listening to their cries and was not (and never would) abandon them. Their artistic creations aided the black community in both telling the truth of their lived stories and transforming their suffering into deep faith and action.

We return to our scripture today, the end of our story. Remember – it's not history, but a fairy tale. And they all lived happily ever after, restored of all their losses and to a ripe old age.

"We want the end of a story to tie up all the loose ends, resolve all the differences, and restore all those to whom wrong has been done, allowing us to close the book with a sigh of satisfaction for a tale well told. Does the end of Job's story meet those expectations?"

[What was the question that Job, his friends AND WE have? Is God Just? Does God operate a universe with moral guidelines? Why do bad things happen to good people?]

In this tale, an "important conversation is left out: the one where God comes to Job and explains to him why all this happened to him. God never tells Job how the story began. He never tells Job about his agreement with the Adversary. He doesn't tell Job that he passed the test with flying colors.

Instead, God [rhetorically asks Job, "where were you...bringing Job to the realization that things are much bigger and more complicated than he ever imagined. God then] asks Job to bring an offering of repentance for his "friends"—friends he probably never wanted to see again, let alone pray for. But in that act of reconciliation Job finds reconciliation as well. It's immediately *after* offering that sacrifice that Job's fortunes are restored. He receives twice as much as before—if you compare the numbers of livestock in chapter one, the doubling is obvious. Job even gets a double lifespan.

But despite the "happy ending" of restored wealth and prosperity, is this really a happy ending? Did Mrs. Job have anything to say about having another ten children? How do sheep and camels compensate for Job's previous agony? Are we being asked, perhaps, to wrestle with the flip side of the coin of underserved suffering—undeserved blessing? Why do the innocent prosper? God's reasons for blessing Job are as unexplained as the reasons for taking the blessings away. Rather than asking "Why me?" maybe we should be asking "Why *not* me?"

Does Job get up the morning after his horrible experiences and accept it all as his due, or does he lie awake all night wondering if he can summon up the courage to risk losing everything again? Does Job realize that even if he looks like the same broken pot he was before, he is profoundly different? Like a mended pot, he has cracks

now. Will he hold up well under pressure? In doubling Job's blessings was God also asking Job to double his faith?

So where are we at the end of this story? We started with the question "why?"—but have we gotten an answer? The Bible offers many answers to that question, but none of them are true all the time. It is possible that, like Job, we may never know the final answer. The truest answer is to live with the fierce faith that assures us that we don't need an answer, to trust that God has the answer even if we don't.

[If nothing else, this tale reminds us that God *is listening*. God does care about us, because even if the story ended at verse nine and Job never had any of his "losses" restored, God still showed up to talk with Job and let Job know that Job's cries were heard. Even if it left Job with unanswered questions.]

Where can we appropriate, then, that fierce faith to live with more questions than answers in our lives? In the lynching era, black artists helped play a daring role in turning suffering into faith. Of the many places where we can turn, one is, "the author of Hebrews [who] points us to the way—a way that Jesus has already prepared for us.

¹³ When God gave Abraham his promise, God swore by himself since God couldn't swear by anyone greater. ¹⁴ God said, I will certainly bless you and multiply your descendants. ¹⁵ So Abraham obtained the promise by showing patience. ¹⁶ People pledge by something greater than themselves. A solemn pledge guarantees what they say and shuts down any argument. ¹⁷ When God wanted to further demonstrate to the heirs of the promise that her purpose doesn't change, she guaranteed it with a solemn pledge. ¹⁸ So these are two things that don't change, because it's impossible for God to lie. He did this so that we, who have taken refuge in him, can be encouraged to grasp the hope that is lying in front of us. ¹⁹ This hope, which is a safe and secure anchor for our whole being, enters the sanctuary behind the curtain. ²⁰ That's where Jesus went in advance and entered for us, since he became a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

¹⁹ Brothers and sisters, we have confidence that we can enter the holy of holies by means of Jesus' blood, ²⁰ through a new and living way that he opened up for us through the curtain, which is his body, ²¹ and we have a great high priest over God's house.

²² Therefore, let's draw near with a genuine heart with the certainty that our faith gives us, since our hearts are sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies are washed with pure water.

²³ Let's hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, because the one who made the promises is reliable.

(Hebrews 6:13-20, 10:19-23)

'For many African American Christians the cross may have been God's answer to the lynching tree, it was no easy answer, no matter how deep one's faith. There is no sufficient answer to the challenge of persistent and deep suffering without a deep spiritual wrestling with life and death in the midnight of human existence, as human beings search for the eternal message of hope ... that dawn will come' (89).

Just as Jesus and Job both uttered the prayer "My God, why have you forsaken me," both of them also responded to the unknowns of their faith by deciding to trust God with the rest of their lives.

Job does it in this last chapter of his story; Jesus did it on a cross. Both said, "Lord, into your hands, I commend my spirit."¹

¹ Leunk, Thea & Alsum Esther. [Answering the Questions or Questioning the Answers?](https://www.reformedworship.org/article/december-2009/answering-questions-or-questioning-answers?)

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Can we do the same?

AMEN