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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2B18  
4 Pentecost (Proper 7B) 11:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. Eucharist  
Sunday 20 June 2021

Job 38:1-11  
Psalm 133  
2 Corinthians 6:1-13  
Mark 4:35-41

### **The Whirlwind and this Beautiful, Dangerous World**

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth... when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy” (Job 38)?

For a season we lived on the edge of an enormous beach wildlife preserve on the island of Maui. Every morning before dawn I would take my ten foot stand up paddle board parallel to the shore going upwind. I traveled over fabulous green reefs and because I was standing, I could see through perfectly clear water deep into the world of sea turtles, octopuses and tropical fish. Building morning winds would blow me through the whitecaps back home.

To surf during a favorable tide sometimes I would paddle later in the day to a downwind reef. Then I would fly along the face of mirror-like waves feeling a perfect freedom. As the wind grew stronger I knew I had to leave soon before it became impossible to make it back.

I remember one Saturday just riding a few more waves that I should have and then facing a kind of wall of wind as I turned back. Lying down flat and paddling the board was only enough to get me half way home. Feeling humiliated I had to carry the paddle and heavy board along the beach through howling winds with my in-laws and friends watching. Wind and chaotic seas can remind us that we are not in control. There is something about God’s creation that attracts me even to the point of danger.

Henry David Thoreau writes, “I believe in the forest, and in the meadow, and in the night in which the corn grows... Give me a wildness that no civilization can endure... Nature is a personality so vast and universal that we have never seen one of her features...” “The highest that we can attain to is not Knowledge, but Sympathy with Intelligence.”<sup>1</sup> For Thoreau that “Intelligence” is God.

While modern technology has made it possible to understand and control the world in new ways we still inhabit a wild universe that we can never fully understand. For thousands of years wise people have studied the place of human beings in the world. The poetic beauty which I love in the Book of Job stands in this tradition. Today we will study Job together. Our homework will be to read the last four chapters of the book.

Scholars guess that an anonymous author composed the Book of Job in seventh century BCE. It tells the story of a fabulously wealthy man named Job who lived in the distant country of Uz. None of the characters in this book are Israelites. It is impossible to place any events in history. All of this helps us to avoid being distracted by any historical or cultural questions. It makes the writing feel timeless, as if it could have just happened.

After providing a quick inventory of Job’s many possessions and giving a short account of his piety, the scene changes. Suddenly the reader finds herself in the heavenly realms at a kind of senior staff meeting. In it God describes Job as “blameless and upright.”

God says that Job, “fears God and turns away from evil” (Job. 1). Among the “heavenly beings” there is a figure called by the Hebrew word “Satan” which means adversary, accuser, prosecutor.

Addressing God, Satan argues that of course Job is righteous. You have, “blessed the work of his hands.” But if you were to take these things away he would “curse you to your face.” And so God delivers Job over to Satan and terrible things happen to him.

In one day Job learns that all of his possessions have been stolen or destroyed. His children, who are in the habit of feasting together at their eldest brother’s house, are all killed after the building collapses in a wind storm. At first Job shows a miraculous composure. He says, “the LORD gave and the LORD has taken away, blessed be the name of the LORD.”

At this point as the first chapter draws to a close the reader might think that this book will answer the question of why God allows suffering. But it never does.

Job has three friends Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite who go to console and comfort him. For seven days and nights they sit with him without saying a word.

For the author these three represent the best that ancient Near Eastern philosophy has to offer about the nature of the world and human beings. Each one speaks and then Job rebuts them in turn. When you get right down to it their argument is simple. It goes like this: “God is just. God arranges all things according to the rules of justice. Because Job is suffering, somehow he must have sinned.”

They reason that Job must be guilty of some secret wrong-doing. So they even go as far as to make up sins that they suggest Job must have committed.

As Job is tormented by painful illnesses and the assertion of friends who tell him that it is his own fault, he loses control. He knows he’s innocent. Just as God said at the beginning he is “blameless and upright.” He starts contradicting himself, wondering out loud what is happening to him. He used to think that God was just, but he simply cannot reconcile this with his suffering.

Job even suggests that God, “mocks at the calamity of the innocent” (Job. 9:23). Throughout these speeches Job no longer speaks coherently. He defends God, cries out in pain, doubts God’s goodness, confesses his own ignorance and finally in his last speech he demands that God hear him. He insists on seeing God face to face.

At this point another younger friend named Elihu suddenly appears. Elihu suggests that perhaps Job’s suffering is to prevent him from committing a future sin or that it is a way that God is shaping his character for the better.

And then Job gets his heart’s desire. God answers him through a voice coming out of a storm, a whirlwind. But rather than giving a straightforward response, God answers with a series of questions. These lines invite the hearers to imagine the vast perspective in time and space that comes with being God.

God says, “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth... when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?... Have you entered into the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been revealed to you?” (Job. 38).

God asks Job questions about massive planetary forces and distant constellations of stars, “Have you entered the storehouses of the snow... Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades or loose the cords of Orion.” I love how God then asks Job if he understands the intimate details of other living creatures like lions, ravens, oxen, asses, and even ostriches. God says, “Do you know where the mountain goats give birth, Do you observe the calving of the deer?” God even tells Job what a battle feels like from the perspective of a war horse (“When the trumpet sounds, it says ‘Aha!’ from a distance it smells the battle” (Job. 39).

God has the power required to fashion the worlds and at the same time knows the intimate secrets of every living creature. There is a logic to saying God is just, therefore the world is just, therefore sin is punished by suffering. But God points to a much deeper logic that still eludes us today. Job and his friends have relied on the false assumption that the tiny horizon of their life experience is enough to understand and accuse God.

In the Old Testament the sea stands as a symbol for chaos and disorder that threatens human life. God goes on to talk about mythical animals that personify this energy: the behemoth and leviathan. In the Bible these are symbols of danger. God’s world is good but it is not safe.

Why is there suffering? God does not answer this question except to point out that we live in an amazing, mysterious world that is more apt to evoke our awe than to prevent us from suffering. In the end Job apologizes to God and acknowledges his foolishness.

To the friends, God says that Job has spoken rightly. Certainly God does not suggest by this that everything Job said was perfectly accurate. What I think this means is that God understands Job’s struggles and honesty. God appreciates Job’s desire to encounter holiness. I think this is what God wants from us too.

In the end God restores everything that Job lost – his possessions and strangely in a dreamlike way even a new family. These things are not a reward for having believed or acted rightly, but just a generous gift like the gifts we receive when we really see the beauty around us.

My friends this COVID time has been like a terrible storm at sea but here we are together again. Jesus was not asleep on a cushion in the stern of our boat. Jesus has guided us and brought us to this new shore.

During this time many of us have learned like Job to bring our disappointments, despair, even our criticisms and indignation to God. We have realized again the futility of thinking that we can stand even with God, or see the world in the way that God does.

We are growing up to recognize that we do not have to defend God's ways to critics, but have only to speak of the hope that God inspires in us.

We have begun to realize even more deeply that we inhabit an unsafe world, whose beauty, wildness and mystery will always surprise us. And that God's love and care for every creature will always exceed our understanding.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, thank you for gathering us together, for bringing us safely to the beginning of this day in which we might behold you in a new light. Thank you for the mysterious wildness that surrounds us and inspire us to preserve the richness of your creation. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," *The Natural History Essays* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Gibbs Smith, 1980) 113, 130, 128.