



## On Job: Making Sense of Mystery?

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin  
The Third Sunday after Pentacost ~ June 21, 2009*

Job 38:1-11

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:  
'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?  
Gird up your loins like a man,  
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.  
'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"?

It is more urgent for some of us than for others but I believe we are all driven by a need to make sense of the world around us, to find some sense of order, coherence, and purpose. We find ourselves in varying circumstances in which we are either subject or object in an ordering process – recipients or creators of certain situations. I like solving problems, exploring options, finding solutions.

A dilemma arises when we take this natural inclination into the realm of the religious, when we apply it in our quest for the spiritual, the holy, and divine. For the essential gift and blessing of faith is an appreciation of the mysterious, of the profound un-know-ability of life, death, love and the cosmos. This is a part of the deep draw toward the holy, toward God.

Nonetheless it is often important for us to find some degree of predictability in the unknown, to arrange moral coherence, to attempt to cooperate with God in some appreciative cause and effect relationship. From rain dances, to the burning of witches, from the casting of covenants or early navigators to sophisticated genetic ethicists, scholars and simpletons have sought to intuit, or apply or understand, how the divine, how God, intervenes in and effects our lives.

One instance in which this comes home to us with immediacy is – to use the title of Rabbi Kushner's well known

book – “when bad things happen to good people.” Why did God do this? Why did God let this happen? Cancer. The slave trade. The holocaust. The Air France jet that crashed into the sea.

When we come face to face with these crises, our hearts and minds burn to make sense, to arrive at some form of resolution. Among the many situations I encountered as a hospital chaplain years ago, one that stays vividly clear is the time spent in the emergency room with the family of a little boy hit by a dump truck. Ever since that time, I have been clear in my own thinking that God cannot be both all-loving and all-powerful. If God is all powerful then God could have prevented that accident – and countless others like it – from happening yet did not...

Which would mean God is either derelict, or had some purpose, some intent in effecting this accident. But could God intend an eleven year old boy to be hit by a truck and die so senselessly?

You can see the wheels spinning furiously in my quest for order. Some would say, “Yes, God intends such things; we just don’t know why” – a perspective affirmed in the expression, “God took him from us.” My own faith rebels against this answer: “No, God cannot have willed this.” God did not will that little boy to be hit any more than God willed the holocaust or any disaster. Yet, God did not intercede. Thus, God is not all-powerful. Rather, God is all-loving; God loves us, and loves especially the little children. God weeps with our losses.

Job, we are told, is a blameless and upright man who fears God and resists evil. Job is also a healthy and prosperous man, with many children and animals, a large and merry farm.

A conversation takes place in heaven between Satan and God. Satan contends that Job’s faithfulness is contingent upon the tangible blessings of his life. Whereas, God is confident that Job’s faith is deeper than this, and offers to Satan that he may do what he wishes with Job; for Job will remain faithful regardless. Essentially, it’s a bet and Job is a pawn in the game. Brutally, over time, Satan wipes out Job’s family and possessions – killing his crops, his livestock, his family, and taking Job’s health from him.

Yet, even in grief and agony, Job remains faithful.

Three friends each offer different perspectives, interpreting what has happened, proposing alternate solutions according to various moral and covenantal arrangements. Job cries out to God for understanding, yet even in the face of holy silence, rejects his friend’s calculations and remains faithful. Thirty-eight chapters later, after agony and inquiry, God finally speaks, but as scholar Walter Brueggemann points out (in *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2005, p.390 ff.), the answer given out of the whirlwind is not “a user-friendly answer.” “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? 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? Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare if you know all this.”

In the answer to Job, observes Brueggemann, Yahweh, the God of Israel, “is lordly, haughty, condescending, dismissive, reprimanding, refusing to entertain Job’s profound question ... and refusing to enter into any discussion about justice, sanctions, moral reliability, or covenantal symmetry. ...the ground of Yahweh’s response is in power, the power of the Creator God who is genuinely originary, who can found the earth, bound the sea, summon rain and snow, order the cosmic lights, and keep the food chain functioning.”

“This is indeed “God beyond God,” who denies to Job (and to Israel) the comfort of moral symmetry. Job (and Israel) now are required to live in a world where nothing is settled or sure or reliable except the overwhelmingness of God. Israel is dazzled in a way that endlessly mesmerizes, threatens and destabilizes.” “The God of the whirlwind refuses the domestication to which Israel was intensely tempted” – as am I.

For good or ill, my desire for order retaliates. I concede that domestication of God and negotiation with God is a futile pursuit. Yet I cannot rest in the prospect that our relationship with God is simply arbitrary. I cannot leave you with such a conclusion. Call it a blessed relief, or a cheap salve, but I return us to mystery. If deep and profound unknowability is a source for us of angst and potential despair, is it not equally a source for awe, for delight, for humility in the face of divine creation and majesty? We cannot know, yet we trust God’s abiding love.

So I close by reading a few delightful paragraphs from the introduction of Bill Bryson’s book: *A Short History of Nearly Everything*.

“Welcome. And congratulations. I am delighted that you could make it. Getting here wasn’t easy, I know. In fact, I suspect it was a little tougher than you realize.

“To begin with, for you to be here now trillions of drifting atoms had somehow to assemble in an intricate and intriguingly obliging manner to create you. It’s an arrangement so specialized and particular that it has never been tried before and will only exist this once. For the next many years (we hope) these tiny particles will uncomplainingly engage in all the billions of deft, cooperative efforts necessary to keep you intact and let you experience the supremely agreeable but generally underappreciated state known as existence.

“Why atoms take this trouble is a bit of a puzzle. Being you is not a gratifying experience at the atomic level. For

all their devoted attention, your atoms don't actually care about you – indeed, don't even know that you are there. They don't even know *they* are there. They are mindless particles, after all, and not even themselves alive. ... Yet somehow for the period of your existence they will answer to a single overarching impulse: to keep you you.

“The bad news is that atoms are fickle and their time of devotion is fleeting – fleeting indeed. Even a long human life adds up to only about 650,000 hours. And when that modest milestone flashes past, or at some other point thereabouts, for reasons unknown your atoms will shut you down, silently disassemble, and go off to be other things. And that's it for you.

“Still, you may rejoice that it happens at all. Generally speaking in the universe it doesn't, so far as we can tell. This is decidedly odd because the atoms that so liberally and congenially flock together to form living things on Earth are exactly the same atoms that decline to do it elsewhere. Whatever else it may be, at the level of chemistry life is curiously mundane: carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, and nitrogen, a little calcium, a dash of sulfur, a light dusting of other very ordinary elements – nothing you wouldn't find in any ordinary drugstore – and that's all you need. The only thing special about the atoms that make you is that they make you. That is of course the miracle of life.”

Says the Psalmist: “When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars you have set in their courses, What is man that you should be mindful of him?” (Psalm 8)

“O Lord, what are we that you should care for us? Mere mortals that you should think of us? We are like a puff of wind; our days are like a passing shadow.” (Ps. 144)

“Praise the Lord, O my soul! I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God while I have my being. Hallelujah!” (Ps. 146)