

'Living with creation' Sermon taken from Job 38:1-18 Mark 4:35-41, preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 20 June 2021 by Rev Murray Rae

The book of Job from which we have read this morning has been described as one of the great texts of world literature. It tells the story of a man who lived an exemplary life who was without fault and who had prospered greatly. His righteousness is a point of emphasis in the opening scene of the story and that matters. For the book of Job is an exploration of the reality of suffering and it resists the easy claim that those who suffer are somehow to blame. Job is a righteous man; all is well with him, and yet as the story proceeds his world comes crashing down. First it was his oxen and his his donkeys which were carried off by a neighbouring people who then killed Job's servants for good measure. Then it was his sheep in the fields and more servants killed by lightning strike from the heavens. Neighbours came again and stole his camels and then, plunging Job into despair, his children were killed by a collapsing building destroyed by a terrific gale. And so on goes the tale of woe until Job himself is reduced to misery and is covered from head to toe in loathsome sores.

This is Act 1 scene 1 in the drama of Job's suffering. The scene ends however by making the point again: In all of this Job did not sin. Nor did he charge God with any wrong-doing. 'Naked I came from my mother's womb', Job says 'and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.' It was in fact Satan or the satan the adversary who had inflicted the suffering upon Job. He did so it seems in order to demonstrate that Job's piety and devotion to God was a function of his prosperity and could easily be destroyed if the blessings of his life were stripped away. But Job did not yield to the satan's efforts to destroy his faith. Job found no cause to blame God for his suffering. He has been afflicted by disease; his children and his sheep have been struck down by forces of nature, and his possessions have been carried off by marauding neighbours. But, confounding the expectations of the satan, Job held fast to his belief in the goodness and the trustworthiness of the Lord.

It is not that Job remained stoic. He makes no secret of his agony and distress and he cries out in protest to God. I will not restrain my mouth says Job. I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.

In this great text of world literature, the depths of human suffering are laid bare. There is no papering over the agonies that people have endured. The text takes us right into the dark abyss of human suffering and pain.

There is no tolerance either for easy answers, for platitudes generated by a piety which with its confident assertions in the face of suffering neither wounds nor heals deeply enough. Job's friends turn up to offer those easy answers. Job you must have sinned, they say. Their theory of just deserts, favoured especially by those who have done alright in life, offers a simple solution. Those who suffer are clearly at fault and so must turn their lives around. That's the meaning of the word repent. The poor have only themselves to blame so the theory goes. Those who suffer have surely brought it upon themselves. It's up to them therefore to repent, to turn their lives around. Don't expect any help or any sympathy from us.

For those tempted by that theory and most of are from time to time we should hear the rebuke of Job. We should hear the rebuke of this great text of world literature. The just deserts theory will not work, at least not all of the time. People suffer when it is not their fault. We are sometimes pitted against destructive forces that are not of our own making and which we have no power to withstand.

That brings us to the part of the story that we read this morning: Job chapter 38. Throughout the preceding chapters Job's friends have continued to offer their shallow diagnoses and Job has continued to voice his opposition and his complaint.

'Today also my complaint is bitter; [Job cries]

[God's] hand is heavy despite my groaning.

O that I knew where I might find him,
that I might come even to his dwelling!

I would lay my case before him,
and fill my mouth with arguments.

I would learn what he would answer me,
and understand what he would say to me.

Throughout the 37 chapters of dialogue between Job and his friends, and the intervening laments of Job himself, God has remained silent. There has been no divine intervention to settle the theological disputes, nor any response to Job's anguished cries. Until we get to chapter 38.

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?

This seems at first to be a strange response. There are no words of comfort here, nor any explanation of why Job should have suffered so much. What's going on?

God continues:

'...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"?
'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,
or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?
Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?
Declare, if you know all this.

This seems at first to be a strange response to Job's complaint. But let's attend a little to what it is that God has to say.

The first thing to note is that God does respond. God has been silent during the theological arguments offered by Job's friends and through the long course of Job's lament but he has not been inattentive. Job doesn't get a solution to the problem of why he suffers but he does get an answer to the question, where is God when the storms rage against us. What Job learns is that God is present and God is attentive. God has been in the boat all along as the storm raged and the waves threatened to overwhelm.

Note here in verse 1 that God speaks 'out of the whirlwind'. The storm is real and it is threatening; there's no denying that. But the storm does not betoken the absence of God. It is in the midst of the whirlwind that God eventually does speak.

What else do we learn from God's response? We learn I think, that we are going to have to unlearn certain ways of thinking about the world, and certain ways of thinking about God. The world does not exist simply for our convenience. There are forces at work in nature that are not subject to our control and whose mysteries we are not even close to comprehending. We also need to unlearn the presumption that we are creation's master. We cannot do with nature as we wish nor exploit it relentlessly for our own purposes. Nature provides abundantly for our needs, but it has a power and a complexity of its own – given by God we are reminded – that we must learn to live with. The dominion we are called to exercise is not domination. It involves cultivation, stewardship, respect, and a careful observance of our own proper limits.

The forces of nature can be threatening; they can wreak havoc when they are not respected, but we learn also from God's speech that their power is not without limit. There is an order to things that God has established. Even the sea that rages fearsomely at times is likened by a God to a new born child: 'When it burst from the womb, God says', I made the clouds its garment and thick darkness its swaddling band. It was I who said, 'Thus far shall you come and no farther and here shall your proud waves be stopped.' God has set limits to the power of the sea but we must learn to respect them.

God's speech to Job challenges further the assumption that everything must be arranged to suit us and be subjected to our own control. We have more unlearning to do.

There are theological assumptions too that must be unlearned particularly, in this case, the neat calculation that would have God conform to our human expectations. God will not be

shackled, for example, by the expectation that everything must be arranged to suit the interests of the human race. We can be sure of God's attentiveness to our needs and to our suffering, and we can be sure of God's promise that the day will come when every tear will be wiped from our eyes and there will be suffering and pain no more, but God is not a butler who will answer our command whenever we ring the bell.

The echoes of Genesis 1 resonate throughout the passage we have read. God speaks from out of the whirlwind. Just as a mighty wind swept over the face of the waters in Genesis 1 and God said let there be light, so here in Job the speech of God begins to bring order into the chaos of Job's suffering. God proceeds to take Job on a tour of creation. God reminds Job that it was he who laid the foundations of the earth who set bounds to the reach of the sea, who commanded the morning and caused the dawn to know its place.

We are being reminded that there is an order to things, an order that God has established. But that order is not determined by our own desire for a world arranged simply to serve our interests.

A little earlier in Job, there is an interlude in which the narrator offers a perspective on the debate that is raging between Job and his friends. The interlude is a hymn to wisdom:

But God understands the way to it; it is he who knows its place.

For he looked to the ends of the earth; and beheld everything under the heavens. (28:23-4)

That interlude is also an anticipation of chapter 38 for here we are being invited to align our gaze with God's and to see things from a perspective other than our own.

God has bestowed creation with a certain capacity to be itself. We may call it freedom. Oceans will behave as oceans do; tectonic plates will shift and rearrange the land; wild animals will do their own proper thing; and it isn't all there simply to serve humanity's interests. We human beings have work to do in learning to live in a world over which we are not master, and which does not exist merely for our sake. Learning to live in such a world is one of the things that wisdom involves.

The prosperity of Job and the blessing of God are restored to him in the end but there are things to be learned first. The divine speech in chapter 38 offers Job and it offers us the opportunity to reconsider the trustworthiness of God. Will Job place himself in the hands of God in faith or will he trust God only after wresting from God an explanation of all God's plans? Will he trust God only after an assurance that everything will be arranged to ensure his own prosperity and comfort. That's the temptation that Job resists, and in the end God commends him for it.

There is a New Testament way of putting the same question. Will you trust yourself to the God whose behaviour sometimes looks like foolishness, whose promise of blessing is realised through a cross, and who invites us to a form of life that may well bring suffering and even persecution? The call to keep company with this God offers no assurance of a life of comfort, no guarantee that we will prosper. To follow him, however, is to trust that in the hands of this God all things will be ordered to our good. Amen

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*Captivated by the vision of the realm of God,
made known in Jesus, given in grace*



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