

Job 38:1-11

The Lord Answers Job

38 Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:

2 “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

3 Gird up your loins like a man,
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

4 “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

5 Who determined its measurements—surely you know!

Or who stretched the line upon it?

6 On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone

7 when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings[a] shouted for joy?

8 “Or who shut in the sea with doors
when it burst out from the womb?—

9 when I made the clouds its garment,
and thick darkness its swaddling band,

10 and prescribed bounds for it,
and set bars and doors,

11 and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther,
and here shall your proud waves be stopped’?

Mark 4:35-41

When evening had come, Jesus said to his disciples, “Let us go across to the other side.” And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

God of the Storm

This morning we have two stories, both of them contain a storm, and both of them have God asking a question from out of the storm. In both of them the question, and the message implied in them are the same.

What is the significance of the storm? There are a number of places in the bible where God speaks from out of a cloud or storm; this is a recurring theme of the bible. But God is not a storm, even though he is sometimes described as such. So then, why a storm?

In the thousands of years of God acting among his people, we haven't changed much. The bible often describes us as a stiff-necked proud people, and that is as true today as it was in Moses' time. Some

may say even more so today – I'm not sure we're any worse now than way back then, though it does seem a little more easy to see now.

Being stiff-necked and proud refers to the illusion that we live in, where we tell ourselves that we are in control; that our knowledge and our technology are all that is needed for us to make our own Eden. We are not beholden to anyone or anything; we are independent creatures here on this earth.

Thinking that we are completely independent and autonomous leads us down some dangerous paths. Our pride in our abilities, and our conviction of our right to use those abilities in any way we see fit has led to oppression of others – slavery, both physical slavery with chains, and indentured slavery where debt and lack of opportunity enslave not just classes of people, but entire nations. Remember that next time you're buying cheap goods manufactured in Asia.

Our pride in our abilities also leads to the oppression of creation. We wipe out entire species because we think their horns are valuable, or we think that eating their livers make us more virile and strong. We level thousands of acres of rainforest every day, destroying habitats of creatures that we don't even know exist yet, and we weaken the lungs of the planet in doing this, because we want the wood, and we need grazing land so we can have our Sunday barbeques.

We level mountains – this seems like an odd perversion of Jesus' saying that if we have faith the size of a mustard seed we can move mountains. My birth father used to work for a company out west that levels mountains. They start at the top, drill holes, fill them with explosives and blow it up. After clearing and processing the rubble, they do it again until there is no mountain left. I'm sure we've all seen pictures of the tailings ponds – lakes actually – that are left over from this kind of mining that look like some horror show from another planet.

We are in love with our technology, technology that seems to give us the power of God – the power to move mountains, to genetically modify plants and animals and change the very fabric of life itself.

I'm not against science and technology – I wrote this sermon on a laptop, I drive a car, I can dial a telephone. Science makes it possible for doctors to do some incredible things that we don't even think are incredible anymore, like removing and cleaning the cornea from your eye, then putting it back in again. Science and technology are neither good nor evil – these are simply tools we use and we can choose to use them to help or to harm.

But for all our fascination with our knowledge, we need to recognize that knowledge is not the same thing as wisdom. Just because we can do something, doesn't necessarily mean that we should. And we should be careful not to misinterpret what we learn through our sciences.

One thing that comes to mind is the discovery of the 'God spot.' This is an area of the brain that is active when people are having spiritual experiences. I've heard many atheists claim that this disproves the existence of God – God is all in our head. But they ignore the bigger picture. When we see something, or touch something, there is an area of the brain that is active – but it's only active in response to the things that we are seeing or feeling. Our brains don't create the thing we see, nor the thing we touch – our brains only respond to those external things. Likewise with the God Spot – we've identified a receptor – a button that is pressed during spiritual encounters, so to speak, but there still needs to be a button presser. A button presumes the existence of a maker and presser, it certainly doesn't disprove it.

All this to say that we are enamoured by our mastery of the physical world. We operate under the illusion that we are in control; that we have all the answers, and in some cases we seem to think either that we no longer need God, or that if there is a God that it must be us.

This is why God appears often in storms. For all our knowledge, for all our technological achievements, for all our power – we are still puny in the face of a storm. We can't create storms – and we can't avert them when they come.

The recent flooding in cottage country, and on the east coast where I'm headed in a few days are an example. Last night was a furious storm – I took advantage of it by going outside with a shovel to find the last of the low spots near my house where water was collecting. But on a larger scale hurricanes, typhoons, tornados, tsunamis, ice storms, flooding, years of drought - all of these things are out of our control, and many people die every year despite our best efforts to predict and warn people of these events. Storms remind us that there are forces much stronger than us. Storms remind us of our limitations, of our weakness and frailness in the face of such forces.

The storm signifies the ultimate power of God, and our own powerlessness. So, when the storm speaks, we had better listen. What is it that the voice from the storm says in each of these scriptures?

The reading from Job was part of God's response to some questions posed by Job. You'll remember that Job lost everything – his family, his herds, his wealth – but still maintained his faith in God. By this part of the book there has been a shift from Job maintaining his integrity in spite of affliction to thinking that his integrity should have protected him from affliction. Good things happen to good people. Finally Job cried out to God, why me?

This in itself is not wrong – we've all had times when we ask why me and the Psalms are full of these kinds of questions to God. But Job went a little further and began thinking that he knew better than God, that if God only knew what Job knew then things would be different. He says let me be weighed in a just balance, and let God know my integrity! Can't you see how good I've been?(Job 31:6). He claims that God is unjust and doesn't know how to properly run his creation.

Many of us have also been in this position as well. We sometimes think that we know more than God – if we were in charge we certainly wouldn't do things this way. This is us thinking that we're better or more capable than God.

And so God responded. Not by evaluating the merits of Job's case, God doesn't try to justify himself to Job, but rather he responds by questioning Job's knowledge of the mysteries and purposes of God.

He begins, Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge? (Uh oh) Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. (At this point Job is probably thinking he's made a mistake – how often do we speak angrily to God because we don't really expect him to respond?)

“Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand.

Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!

Who stretched a measuring line across it?

On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone—while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?

God was reminding Job that Job had zero knowledge of the first things – the basic things. Job has appeared somewhere in the middle of the story of creation yet somehow thinks that he knows it all. God is pointing out to Job the unbridgeable gap between divine and human knowledge. It's like listening to the questions of a two year old about nuclear physics – they don't even know enough for the questions to make sense.

There's a song that I used to listen to by the Crash Test Dummies where God is with his people on a Sabbath, and they ask him questions, but the questions are so pedantic and nonsensical that God can't even answer them. The gap between human and divine is huge.

But despite that initial blast of Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me, which likely terrified Job, the rest of what God had to say was in fact very comforting. The questions continued for a long time, reminding Job that he had almost no knowledge about anything, but through it all the message is this: Job, you don't have these answers, but I do. I laid the earth's foundation, I marked off its dimensions, I stretched a measuring line across it. I know all these things Job, and I know more about you than you yourself do. So have faith. I have not brought you this far just to abandon you. You don't have knowledge, but I have given you faith, and that is your comfort and your strength.

Let's look at that other storm, where Jesus was sleeping in the back of the boat while the disciples cried out as the waves broke over the boat. Again, the storm is the reminder of our own limitations. The sea of Galilee is smaller than the great lakes – it's only 11km across and you can easily see clear across it, but even a storm on this little lake is showed the disciples how powerless they are.

So they woke up Jesus and started with their questions – how can you be sleeping? Don't you know there's a storm? Don't you care if we drown? Don't you love us? Just like Job.

Jesus responded by turning to the waves and commanding them 'Quiet, be still.' And the sea was calm. And now the voice of the Lord turned to the disciples – his questioners. He asked 'why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?' I am the Lord of the storm, and you have me with you. What's your problem?

I do find it kind of amusing that this miracle didn't stop the questions – the disciples turned from Jesus and began asking each other 'who is this guy anyway?'

A quick note about human nature and obedience here:

Jesus said to the wind 'be quiet' and it was. He said to the waves 'be still' and they were. Jesus said to the disciples 'be calm' and they continued buzzing around like a hive of bees. There's a whole sermon in that little observation, but that will have to wait for another time.

In both of these storm stories human beings were so busy looking at creation that they forget the creator. The disciples were with Jesus because they've seen him work miracles, yet during the storm they didn't think to look to him until the end, when they thought they were about to die. They didn't wake him up first, they woke him up last out of desperation. No faith.

Job as well was looking at the world and not God. He was convinced that his righteousness should mean that nothing bad could happen to him. But storms will come. People will die, people will get sick. There

are bad crop years and car accidents. Other people let us down, factories close – bad things will happen. This is just part of being finite physical beings.

We are not all powerful, and we don't understand the mysteries of God. Instead of railing against it, which accomplishes little, at some point we are better off if we accept the reality of our human limitations, because let's face it, even if God did answer all our questions about why we would still be left dealing with whatever problem we are facing. Our questions aren't really about finding answers, are questions really are about us asserting our pride and seeking justification of some sort. They don't really help.

Job's deeper need, the disciples' deeper need, and our deeper need when we are in that dark chaotic place is to know that God has not abandoned us, that God still cares for us. What we need when we suffer is a visit from God. A voice out of the storm that says 'I am here, I am in control. Don't cling to your own understanding, because you don't have the whole picture. Hold onto me, as I am already holding onto you. I will never let you go, so have peace. Be still. And know that I am God.

Amen.