



Challenging God

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost~June 24, 2018*

Job 38:1-11

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?’”

Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32

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| 1 | We give you thanks, O God, for you are good, *
your mercy endures for ever. | 26 | They mounted up to the heavens
and fell back to the depths; *
their hearts melted because of their peril. |
| 2 | Let all those whom you have redeemed proclaim *
that you redeemed them from the hand of the foe. | 27 | They reeled and staggered like drunkards *
and were at their wits' end. |
| 3 | You gathered them out of the lands; *
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south. | 28 | Then they cried to you in their trouble,*
and you delivered them from their distress. |
| 23 | Some went down to the sea in ships *
and plied their trade in deep waters; | 29 | You stilled the storm to a whisper *
and quieted the waves of the sea. |
| 24 | They beheld your works, O God *
and your wonders in the deep. | 30 | Then were they glad because of the calm, *
and you brought them to the harbor they were bound for. |
| 25 | Then you spoke, and a stormy wind arose, *
which tossed high the waves of the sea. | 31 | Let them give thanks to you for your mercy *
and the wonders you do for your children. |
| | | 32 | Let them exalt you in the congregation of the people *
and praise you in the council of the elders. |

II Corinthians 6:1-13

As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, “At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.” See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything. We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. In return—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts also.

Mark 4:35-41

On that day, when evening had come, Jesus said to them, "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?"

Earlier this week I found myself sitting at my desk crying for children who have been separated from their parents in this country, for who we are as a nation at this moment in time. I cried tears of grief, frustration, horror, anger, and fear. I know we have a history of “othering”, of treating groups of people shamefully—those with black and brown skin, native people, Asians, Catholics, Italians, Irish, Polish—we have a history of identifying a group as less than human and inflicting physical and psychological pain on them. So the present horror is not a new thing—we can’t pretend this is not who we have been. But the difference for me, is that it is now our thing. (I am aware that this is an expression of my white privilege). The difference for me is that it is being done overtly, unashamedly, seemingly gleefully, by our government. And justified with Bible quotes.

One of the hardest things about all of this is that I, and I am guessing you, feel helpless. Other than calling our elected officials, demonstrating, and supporting organizations that provide legal aid, we can’t fix this, can’t just make it stop. It is, to a large extent, beyond our control. Which is a tough place to be—leaving us frustrated and afraid. Sort of like being in a boat in the middle of wildly stormy seas. I can relate to the disciples who were terrified—in an out of control situation—and there is Jesus, snoring away—sleeping as if he didn’t have a care in the world. I would be right with them thinking, saying, “what is WRONG with you—get up and FIX THIS NOW”. In fact I have had a few go-rounds with God this week pretty much saying that exact thing. What is wrong with you? How can you let this happen? And all I got back was silence.

And then I reread the texts for today and realized I want to be like Job. Sort of. I want to sue God on behalf of a whole bunch of innocent children and decimated immigrant families—who may never be reunited. I want to sue God over a nation giving in to its worst nature. Job sues God because he loses absolutely everything; his cattle, his camels, his farm equipment, even his own children—all gone in a minute. He sues God because he knows he has done nothing to deserve what is happening to him. Unlike the disciples in the boat who can see Jesus right there, although doing nothing, Job can’t even see God. Yet somehow Job knows, he trusts that God is present. Present to his suffering. Interested in him. And so, in an act that seems audacious, but is actually an act of deep trust, Job sues God. Job believes God will show up, and Job believes he will get a fair trial because he knows God is just.

So Job sets about figuring out how exactly one sues God. He first worries about getting a subpoena together and delivered. Who will grant that I might know where I might find God, that I might come to God’s abode?

I would set my case in order before God, and fill my mouth with arguments.

After thinking the subpoena problems through, Job concludes that he also needs to find an advocate—someone from his family or his people who will speak for him, who will bail him out. This was the system set up by Moses, if you were in any sort of trouble, a relative would serve as your redeemer. So who would do that for Job? His relatives all abandoned him when he lost everything. His friends too, let him down, telling him it is hopeless.

But Job is determined saying, “I know that my Redeemer, my Advocate, lives, who will at the last stand on the earth; and after my skin has been so destroyed, then in my flesh shall I see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.” That Advocate, the One who stays with him when everyone else has abandoned him, that Redeeming Relative is, of course, God. And so, as Job is sitting, case organized, desperately hoping for God to show up, God does so—in the middle of a whirlwind—and God blows up the courthouse. And rather than set about explaining the Holy Self, God demands that Job answer, “Who is this that darkens counsel by speech without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you will answer me!” Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Don’t you know that I am the mother of ice and snow, birthing them out of my own womb? Don’t you know that I am the father of the rain? Have you given marching orders to the sun every morning from the time before time? Did you plant the stars in the heavens joining them into constellations? Who do you think you are? Don’t you know who I am? (translation by the Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney) And all Job can do in the face of God is put his hand over his mouth. And the speech from God we just heard is pretty much the extent of the answer Job gets. God never really answers Job’s “why” question. But the Book of Job also doesn’t ignore or whitewash pain and suffering. It looks Job’s suffering squarely in the eye. And at the same time, it affirms a God who is there, a God who is with us, a God who responds, albeit a God who does not do what we want or think, a God who does not operate on our timeline, but whose vision, understanding, wisdom out of which God acts, are beyond anything we can comprehend. When Job meets God face-to-face, Job says, “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you. I reject all of this and am comforted in dust and ashes.” Having an encounter with God, you see, was enough. Knowing God was engaged, was enough.

The book of Job bears holy witness to the truth of the victimized and devastated who know that life is not fair, you don’t always get what you deserve, the innocent do suffer and God is in many ways, inscrutable. Yet it asserts

that God is real, God is ultimately just, God is engaged in the world and God will listen when you give God a piece of your mind about what God is doing to you and the ones you love. That's exactly what the disciples do in the Gospel. That is exactly what we do any time we raise an angry fist to God and bellow at the heavens.

Job teaches that even if you are crazy enough to sue God, God will come to meet you where you are, God will speak a word—a word that may not change your circumstances, but will change you. God spoke to Job from chapter 38 to chapter 41, one hundred and twenty nine verses. And in that time, God didn't change a single thing in Job's life. God changed Job.

So what? What is the conclusion? I don't know that there is one from the story of Job, or of the disciples in the boat, or for the terrified families at the border. There is no nice neat conclusion—at least not in this life. But the bottom line, the eternal truth, is that Jesus is in the boat with us. It is the truth that God shows up—often cleverly disguised as another human being, but sometimes not. It is the truth that God is just. It is also the truth that God will listen to our outrage—we can bug, pester, harass God and God will not disappear. We, every person who ever lived, are God's people and God has pledged to stay with us, and ultimately, to reconcile all the earth in justice and peace. What happens next for us we cannot know. But we know we are not in this alone. We have each other and we have the inscrutable God of Job, the enfleshed God of the disciples, and the restless, justice creating, ever loving God of you and me.

*With thanks to the Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney whose thoughts and words influenced this sermon.