



Bigger than Anything

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
The Feast of All Saints ~ November 1, 2020*

Job 38:1-2, 4-5, 8-18 & 41:1-5

Then YHWH answered Job from the heart of the storm: who is this obscuring my plans with such ignorant words? Where were you when I created the earth? If you know the answer, tell me! Who decided its size? Do you know? Who stretched the measuring line across it? And who held back the sea behind partitions when it burst forth from my womb, when I created clouds as the earth's raiment and thick darkness as its swaddling clothes—when I drew limits around the waters and locked the partitions in place and said, “This far and no more; this is where your mighty waves stay”? Have you ever in your life commanded the morning, or told the dawn that its assignment for the day was to grasp the edges of the earth and shake out its wicked? When the dawn lightens things to a clay red, like a garment dyed to a brighter color, the wicked are denied the light, and their threatening arms are broken. Have you traveled as far as the source of the sea, or walked in search of the Abyss? Have you discovered the gates of death? Have you seen the gates of the Place of Darkness? Do you comprehend the breadth of the earth? If so, address the following:
The crocodile, that great Leviathan—can you catch it with a fishhook or put a bit in its mouth? Could you tie its nose with a rope or pierce its jaw with a gaff? Will it beg you for mercy, or timidly ask your pardon? Would it strike a bargain with you, becoming your lifelong servant? Would you then make a pet of it, and lead it around on a leash to amuse the household?

Psalm 104:25-32

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| 25 O Holy One, how manifold are your works; *
in wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures. | you open your hand, and they are filled with good things. |
| 26 Yonder is the great and wide sea
with its living things too many to number, *
creatures both small and great. | 30 You hide your face, and they are terrified; *
you take away their breath,
and they die and return to their dust. |
| 27 There move the ships, and there is that Leviathan, *
which you have made for the sport of it. | 31 You send forth your Spirit, and they are created; *
and so you renew the face of the earth. |
| 28 All of them look to you *
to give them their food in due season. | 32 May the glory of God endure for ever; *
may the Holy One rejoice in all creation. |
| 29 You give it to them; they gather it; * | |

Matthew 8:23-27

Jesus got into a boat and the disciples followed. Without warning, a violent storm broke over the lake, and the boat began to take on water. But Jesus was sleeping, so they shook him awake, exclaiming, “Save us! We are lost!” Jesus replied, “Why are you afraid? You have so little faith!” Then Jesus stood up and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. The others, dumb-founded, said, “Who is this, whom even the winds and the sea obey?”

The last few weeks have felt hard. COVID 19 cases are surging in most states, our civil discourse has (if this even seems possible) deteriorated, for all but the wealthy the economy continues in a downward spiral as many families fall into poverty and the Senate cannot find the time or the will to help, yet another black man—Walter Wallace—was shot and killed by police in West Philly and the constant background noise of white supremacy continues unabated. The news reminded us this week that almost 550 immigrant children will likely never be reunited with their parents, and perhaps the most important election of our lifetime occurs in 2 days. It all feels just....heavy.....overwhelming.....big.

And then we hear a word from the Book of Job, which essentially says, in the words of the Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney whose thoughts and words influenced this sermon, God is bigger. Now that probably sounds trite—bumper sticker theology that is about as deep as the thickness of the bumper sticker itself. Yet that is pretty much what God, though She takes 4 chapters to say so, says to Job. God calls on Job to contemplate the wonders of creation and God's revelation in and through it that Job might see God and God's power, but also see Job's own insignificant place in it. After chapter upon chapter of God telling Job, "This is who I am, who are you?" Job eventually folds and says, "I've said too much" and stops talking. Job has seen, vividly, how much bigger God is and how insignificant he is in comparison. Which sounds like a neat conclusion, but there is more to the story than meets the eye. And it begins long before a conversation between God and Job in the middle of a whirlwind, face to force.

Job, as you probably know, had been overcome by the horror of loss—he had lost everything he owned, everyone he loved. Lost it to violence. He didn't gamble it away, didn't hang with the wrong crowd, didn't do anything wrong at all—yet he found himself going from sitting atop a fortune to sitting atop a dung heap. And it happened so fast that even if a sense of shame had prevented him from asking for help, as it does for so many of us, he wouldn't have had time to open his mouth. In the blink of an eye he lost all of his children, everyone he loved. His world imploded.

Now, while the Book of Job was used by the ancient Israelites as a means of teaching and debating theology, it is not some abstract writing—the scenarios in the story are deeply rooted in reality. The story of Job is our story too. In the ancient world everyone knew someone who tragically, through no fault of their own, had lost money, friends, family—and we do too. The story of Job exists at least in part because there are in fact no good answers to why awful things happen to people. Because even the most elegant theology falls flat when you are looking at a murdered child, a destroyed life.

So Job speaks for all of us when he demands that God explain the mess that is this broken world. Why, Job asks. Why, we ask. Why are children massacred in their school? Why are black people not safe on the streets, in stores, asleep in their own beds? Why are women harassed and assaulted—then disbelieved and vilified when they speak out? Why are so many people so poor and hungry? Why is our nation so torn and implementing policies that are so cruel to so many? So, yes, we have questions. Yes, we have, with Job, yelled into the wind.

But here's the thing, Job did yell into the wind that was God. Job took himself, his pain, his grief, his horror to God. And he took his faith that there had to be a way to make sense of this world that did not involve bad theology. You know the sort: God must have needed another angel. God must be trying to teach you something. God doesn't ever give you more than you can handle. We hear this on the lips of preachers and politicians. We may hear it on our own lips as we try to make sense of the world with the tools we have, the faith we were taught, the wisdom we heard from family and friends, and, often, too many self-help books and TV shows. And there are always lots of people who love us who have definite opinions about what is going on in our lives, what we have done, what we need to do and what it all means.

Job, too had friends. They sat with him through his grief—silently providing support. Then they opened their mouths and began to explain how Job himself had to be ultimately responsible for what had happened to him—he had to have done something wrong, something to invite this pain and suffering. We know how that goes. Women who are blamed for being abused at home, or assaulted—I mean, what did she do to make him angry, what was she wearing and what was she doing out at night? Or people who buy into all sorts of New Age ideas about how we get what we give and draw bad energy to us. Not to mention Christians who question whether we really have enough faith, or maybe we just didn't pray enough to ward off disaster.

But Job, Job rejected all of that. He knew and he managed to hang onto the knowledge that there was nothing he could have ever done to bring about any of what he suffered. So he took it to God. And, as so often happens when we go to God, things don't exactly go as planned or expected. Job went to God, as Wil Gafney says, "holding the pieces of his broken heart in his hands to ask God why and God said, "I am bigger." Bigger than anything we are or experience or have. God is bigger than our circumstances, our preconceptions, and our misconceptions. God is bigger than our faults and our failures, our dreams and our schemes, our hope and our hurt. God is bigger than this crucified and crucifying world. Bigger than storms. Bigger than elections. Bigger than pandemics. Bigger than our nation and its borders. Bigger than

our theologies and our politics, our churches. God is bigger than the Bible with its slaveholding culture, its patriarchy, and the misogyny of its interpreters. Bigger than its Iron Age theology. And yet God still speaks through it just as God spoke to Job through the whirlwind.

The one thing Job did not take away from this awesome encounter with God was an explanation of why all of this happened to him. The writers of Job seemed to know that when you find your way back to God after a tragedy you do not get answers. You may never hear God speaking to you about your sorrow. But you will find a God who is present. A God who is bigger and greater and grander and more exalted and more majestic than you can imagine. As well as a God who sees your tears and hears your howls into the wind. And sometimes, sometimes, though you do not get the answer to the question you showed up with, God chooses to answer the question you need. For Job it was that none of it was his fault. In fact, it was his friends and their bad theology that was wrong.

And, while I do not want to minimize or explain away, any of the anxiety we are feeling, any of the suffering in the world today, the good news is that the God who spoke with Job through the whirlwind, the God who is wrapped in light as with a garment and who stretches out the heavens like a tent, who makes the clouds her chariot and rides on the wings of the wind, that same God became a child. Begotten, birthed, breastfed, bathed, baptized, and buried. God came to us in a form far less terrifying and more fragile than a whirlwind: a baby. That baby was and is our answer. In living, loving, healing, teaching, dying, and rising, Jesus is the answer to questions we did not ask as much as to questions we shout into the wind. And that same Jesus remains with us through storms, through calm, through everything that comes our way. Whatever it may be. God is bigger. Bigger than our need, bigger than the world's hurt and hunger.. God's love is bigger. God's grace is bigger. God's mercy is bigger. And God is enough. Amen.