

HUMILITY
A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
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Talk about lack of humility!ⁱ Jesus's disciples James and John want him to do whatever they ask of him? Then they ask that they get to sit closest to him in the afterlife? Understandably the other disciples are angry with James and John when they hear about it. Jesus then speaks of political rulers commonly lording it over their people ("Their great ones are tyrants over them"). But for him and his disciples it is to be different. Humility is to be the watchword: "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." Jesus includes himself in this prescription of humility as he explains, "For the Son of Man came not be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

The Common Lectionary for today links this gospel story to a passage from the book of Jobⁱⁱ which has God chastising the once wealthy and prosperous character, Job, who has been complaining and questioning God about his losses and personal ailments: "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." Job also has a humility problem, but by the end of the book he's saying to God, "I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth."ⁱⁱⁱ

I'm utterly fascinated by the book of Job and love having to think about it again whenever it comes up in the triennial lectionary. Today, we're all challenged to think about it in relation to the virtue of humility. First of all, we need to realize how arrogant and presumptuous

Job was for most of the 42 chapters of the book. Only in the first two and the last three chapters of the book does he appear humble at all. Ironically, those chapters seem to be best known, for that's where we get the common notions of Job as ever-patient, all-suffering, never complaining, and faithful to a God who seems to have horribly abused him, based on a wager with Satan.

If you'll remember how the story starts, Job is described as completely blameless and upright and utterly faithful to God.^{iv} Satan dares God to see how blameless and upright and faithful Job will remain if sons and daughters of his are killed and he loses all of his possessions. So, incredibly, God lets Satan do whatever he wants to Job, short of killing him. Here's what Satan does: A house collapses and kills a number of Job's sons and daughters; animals and servants are killed at the hands of enemies like the Sabeans and Chaldeans; and a fire from heaven burns up most of what's left. Job responds by intoning, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." Finally, Satan inflicts "loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head." His wife then says to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die." But Job responds, "Shall we receive the good at the hands of God and not receive the bad?" The narrator tells us, "In all this Job did not sin with his lips."^v

However, starting with the first verse of chapter 3, where Job opens his mouth to curse the very day of his birth, all the way through the end of chapter 31, Job has plenty to say that seems utterly sinful, especially in his calling God vicious, cruel and unjust. Job's definitely not humble. Outrageously insolent and audacious come to mind instead. For example, Job declares that the arrows of the Almighty are in him and the terrors of God are arrayed against him (6:4).^{vi} Job claims that if he could get a day in court against God, he would be proven right in his blamelessness and God would be proven wrong.^{vii} He explains that God is destructive and

immoral, favoring the rich and powerful over the poor and helpless.^{viii} By contrast, Job says he's helped the poor, the widow and the orphan. He's been eyes to the blind, feet to the lame, and father to the needy.^{ix} He insists that it's God who has taken away his rights and has made his soul bitter.^x God has been violent and mean-spirited and doesn't answer Job when he cries out to him.^{xi} The justice and morality expected from God have been turned upside down, because "calamity... [is supposed to] befall the unrighteous and disaster the workers of iniquity."^{xii} Near the end of chapter 31, Job cries out, "'O that I had one to hear me! (Here is my signature! Let the Almighty answer me!)"^{xiii}

Well, answer the Almighty does, as we learn in today's lectionary reading. The answer comes with all the power of nature. God appears in a whirlwind and starts asking what power Job has in comparison to the Almighty: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding... Can you send forth lightening? ... Who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens? ... Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God?" Job understandably responds with humility now, in the face of overwhelming power: "'See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you?" Then God winds up in the whirlwind a second time, again saying, "Gird up your loins like a man; I will question you, and you declare to me... Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified? Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his?"

After more descriptions of what God has created in the cosmos, Job answers a second time with these words: "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted... Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.... I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you;

therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” The proud and arrogant Job is humbled at last in the face of overwhelming power.

But is this an adequate answer to his questions about why a blameless and upright man who was faithful to God should have to undergo all these personal losses and suffering – and for something as trivial as a wager with Satan over a human being – destroying many human and animal lives in the process -- as the reader knows? No, I don’t think so. And neither have all the great authors and commentators who have struggled with the book of Job over the years, like the psychologist Carl Jung in his *Answer to Job* and author Archibald McLeish in his play *J.B.*

So, let me hazard a partial answer that has to do with humility – and not just with abject submission to the overwhelming power of God in the whirlwind. Central to my answer is the experience of a mother who lost her teenage son in a car accident. On the morning of his funeral, she was searching for some kind of comfort, and she found herself turning to the words of God from the whirlwind in the book of Job. Her response later as to why, in all of the Bible, those were the verses in which she found consolation, was: “I needed to know that my pain was not all there was in the world.”^{xiv} (Again: “I needed to know that my pain was not all there was in the world”). There were also the morning stars, and the clouds, and the rain, and lightening, and lions, and ravens. There was all of the earth, and the skies, and the cosmos. There was all of nature and of life and of ongoing creation.

As a biblical commentary I use explains it, “Job had been ready in his pain to give in to the overwhelming sense of despair, to use a curse to destroy the structures of creation that had led to his unbearable existence... Hearing the words of the establishment of earth on secure foundations, the reliable return of the dawn each day, the regulation of life-giving water, and the

nurture of the animals is a reassurance that in spite of the reality of pain and loss, God's creation supports and sustains."^{xv}

Twentieth century Czech philosopher Erazim Kohak put it this way in a book called *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry Into the Moral Sense of Nature*: "When humans no longer think of themselves ...[as] masters of all they survey, when they discern the humility of their place in the vastness of God's creation, then that creation and its God can share the pain... That is the age-old wisdom of the book of Job... When God speaks... [it is] not of pain but of the vastness of the creation... God is not avoiding the issue. [God] is teaching Job the wisdom of bearing the pain that can neither be avoided nor abolished but can be shared when there is a whole living creation to absorb it... When the human...surrenders his pride of place and learns to bear the shared pain... [there is a new kind of relief and sense of meaning]."^{xvi}

Most of the book of Job is a very profound and powerful poem, complex in its structure and its meaning. There's a two chapter prose introduction and there's a two chapter prose conclusion which I have to think were added by later compilers, because they are simplistic and completely out of alignment with the approach of the rest of the book.^{xvii} A wager between God and Satan? I'd rather think of pain and suffering as simply part of life, as the Buddhists say in the first of their Four Noble Truths: All life is suffering. This is just a fact, and it has nothing to do with cosmic punishment for bad deeds or cosmic games between God and Satan. I'm not alone in my thinking, by the way. *The HarperCollins Study Bible* describes the "tensions [that] exist between prose and poetry...[such that] the book is at odds with itself."^{xviii} *The New Interpreter's Bible* explains that Job's moral assumptions about the universe – that bad will come for doing bad and good for doing good – is a limited anthropocentric view and is corrected by God's speeches from the whirlwind: what really needs to be known is the great structures of

creation, downplaying the place of human beings in the cosmos. The fundamental categories in terms of the big picture are not human right and wrong and why do good people suffer but instead the fundamental orderliness of the universe, with the rain falling on the just and the unjust alike.^{xix}

If a moral lesson were to be drawn, it would be that humility means seeing our very small human place in the grandeur of the universe and respecting the interdependent web of existence of which we're all part. God's words in Job are some of the most magnificent nature poetry ever written, reminding us of the critical importance of our humility in the face of natural forces vastly more powerful than we are and likely to lead to our extinction if we ignore them or work against them. God confronts Job from the whirlwind with the limits of Job's human knowledge and capacity.^{xx} For "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth [or]...when the morning stars sang together?" We humans weren't there, and humility will help us now to stay here a little longer.

BENEDICTION

Deep peace of the running wave to you.

Deep peace of the flowing air to you.

Deep peace of the quiet earth to you.

Deep peace of the shining stars to you.

Deep peace of the infinite peace to you. AMEN.

Adapted from Gaelic Runes

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- ⁱ In today's gospel reading from the Common Lectionary, Mark 10:35-45.
- ⁱⁱ Job 38: 1-7, 34-41.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Job 40:4.
- ^{iv} Job 1:1.
- ^v Job 1:1 – 2:10.
- ^{vi} Job 6:4.
- ^{vii} Job 9:32-33; 13:3; 19:6-7; 23:4-7.
- ^{viii} Job 24:4,12,22.
- ^{ix} Job 29:12-16.
- ^x Job 27:2.
- ^{xi} Job 30:2-22.
- ^{xii} Job 31:3.
- ^{xiii} Job 31:35.
- ^{xiv} *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), Vol. IV, p. 631.
- ^{xv} *Ibid.*
- ^{xvi} Erazim Kohak, *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry Into the Moral Sense of Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 46.
- ^{xvii} John Barton and John Muddiman (eds.), *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 201), p. 331.
- ^{xviii} Harold W. Attridge (ed.), *The HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), p. 692.
- ^{xix} *New Interpreter's Bible*, pp. 336-337.
- ^{xx} *Ibid.*, p. 601.