

"I Believe . . ."
Job 38:1-11, Mark 4:26-34
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The second reading today is God's answer to Job's question. But to get a good grasp on this passage, we need to review what Job's question is. This is one of the poetic books of the Hebrew Scriptures, not to be taken literally, but to be taken very seriously. Up to this point in the Bible, the writers have affirmed their strong belief that if one obeys God, if one follows God's commandments, then rewards will follow. The book of Deuteronomy urges the people to choose life—Moses says, “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways . . . then the Lord will bless you. But if your heart turns away and you are led astray to bow down to other gods, I declare to you today that you shall perish. Choose life . . .” But some discovered that it didn't always work out that way. Take Job for instance. He was a good man. He was obedient to the commandments, he lived this out his whole life. Then tragedy struck. “Chaos comes knocking on his door. Thanks to a heavenly duel between God and Satan, Job loses everything. His flocks are stolen, his servants murdered, his children killed, his health ruined.” And Job gets leprosy and goes to sit on the ash heap of his previous life and his wife tells him that he should just curse God and die. Job suffers. But he hasn't done anything wrong. Why does this happen to him? What did he do to deserve this? Nothing, of course. He's a good man. He's innocent. He has not sinned, he hasn't disobeyed God, and yet he suffers. Why? He needs to know. He needs to understand. And so in the end, he challenges God. He challenges God to a trial, convinced that if he only has the chance to plead his case in court, he will be vindicated and things will be set right.

Job's question is of course, our question. Why do bad things happen? Why should a hurricane wipe out lots of Puerto Rico? Why should someone get cancer through no fault of their own? Why should there be a shooting in a high school—what did those kids do to deserve that? Job needs to make sense

of the chaos in his life, just as we try to make sense of the chaos in ours. Most of the time we walk through our days pretending that everything makes sense. That if we just pay our bills and vote occasionally and treat our neighbors well most of the time and obey the laws most of the time, then nothing bad will happen to us. But then something does. And in the dark reaches of the night, if we are brave enough, we question God. Why? Why did this happen? Why did this happen to those I love? Why did this happen to me? And if we are brave enough to listen, God answers:

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: ²“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? ³Gird 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. ⁵Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? ⁶On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone ⁷when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? ⁸“Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?—⁹when I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, ¹⁰and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, ¹¹and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped’?

Where were you when I created the world? We only read eleven verses, but God’s answer goes on for four chapters and takes in the whole universe. “In a fierce and beautiful poetic litany, God describes the works of creation, from the birth of the seas to the movement of the constellations, from the patterns of the wind and rain to the customs of wild creatures. God’s expansive answer from the whirlwind tells Job, “Your categories were far too small. You think in terms of the courtroom. I think in terms of the cosmos. Your human theories cannot possibly capture the complexity of the universe, nor can they contain the chaos. For chaos is part of creation as surely as crocodiles roam the Nile.”¹

The frustrating thing of course is that in all of this beautiful poem, God never really answers Job’s question. Or ours. God never explains why Job has suffered as he has. Barbara Brown Taylor observes, “Job’s question was about justice. God’s answer is about omnipotence, and as far as I know, that is the only answer human beings have ever gotten about why things happen the way they do. God only knows. And none of us is God.”

¹ Reed, Leanne Pearce. *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, volume 3, pp. 149-151.

That's what they tried to teach us the first week in seminary. The two great truths of faith: God exists. And you aren't him. As much as we would like to try to be the ones to explain the ways of God and sometimes even tell God what to do, that's not the way the universe works. Get used to it now. As in the New Testament parable, the seeds that the sower plants, how do they grow? We don't know. There's lots that we don't know. And won't ever know in this life. We might discover the answers to a few "what" or even "how" questions. But the ultimate "Why" questions are beyond us. But we keep asking, don't we? Because the answers to the "Why" questions are ultimately not about information, they are about belief and faith.

That's another of the things that we were challenged with when we first began seminary. Could we write a statement of faith? Could we start a sentence or a paragraph with the words "I believe . . ." and then what would we say? Because that's ultimately the question back to Job, given the chaos of his life, given what he has experienced, does he still believe? What does he believe? In whom does he believe? Because belief is about more than facts. I can believe that Paris is the capital of France, although I've never been there, I believe it. I believe that light sometimes acts like a particle and sometimes like a wave not because I understand it, but because those are the best ways for physicists to describe it. Does it make a difference in my life that I believe those things? No, not really. I believe them, but I don't believe *in* them. When the Bible talks about belief or faith, it is believing in or having faith in someone or something. What do you believe in? In whom do you believe? We're Presbyterians, which means, among other things, that we are a creedal church. We are the inheritors of creeds or confessions or statements of faith. These are documents adopted by the church throughout history that talk about the people's experience of God. The oldest of these is called the Nicene Creed which goes back to the fourth century. For seventeen hundred years Christians have been saying the words that we say once a month, "We believe . . ." This summer we're going to examine some of the things that we believe and we'll use the Nicene Creed as a way to discuss them. But the basic statement

is still "I believe . . ." and that's the ultimate question that comes to Job. Given everything that happened to him, did he still believe? Not just did he believe that God existed, but did he believe in God? Did he trust in him? In the midst of all his unanswered questions, did he still believe in God? God never gave him an answer to his question "why." Instead God gave him God's self. God came to him. He saw the glory of God for himself. And it seems that was answer enough.

this?thisall of this? Why? Why do the righteous suffer? Why do bad things happen to good people?