

“Who Knows More Than I?”
Job 38:1-7, 34-41

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The story of Job was written by someone who wanted an answer to the question, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” A way, way, way, long time ago people believed that if you were good, God would protect you, and if you were bad, God would punish you. It’s a belief that still persists, despite ample evidence otherwise. When we receive a difficult diagnosis, we start to wonder if we could have done something different to keep ourselves healthy. When we lose something we love, whether it’s a job or a person or our wallet, we add it to the string of other things we have lost in our lives and decide it totals up to proof that we are cursed or not worthy or doomed to have rotten luck because of some misdeed we did way long ago. Job is a story that tries to right these wrong assumptions, and it can feel like one of the hardest books to unpack, because it doesn’t have any easy answers about God or humanity.

Job was a good and righteous man--he was wealthy, happily married and had beautiful, smart, obedient sons and daughters. He had a strong faith in God. His faith was so strong that when God and Satan are hanging out together in heaven, as they did from time to time, God says to Satan, "have you seen my friend Job? There is no one else like him on earth! He is the best, and he would never do anything evil." Satan thinks this is just because Job has never been tested--he says that God has made Job's life too easy. God says, "No way! Job would be good and faithful no matter what. Do what you want to Job's life, without physically hurting him, and you'll see that I'm right." Satan agrees and makes it so Job loses all his money. His sons and daughters are taken away from him. Job weeps and is devastated, but he says, "God gave me everything and God took it away. And still I will praise God."

Back up in heaven, God says, "Haha Satan! What did I tell you? Job didn't turn to evil." Satan replies, "That's only because you didn't let me physically harm him! People change when it's them you hurt, not just the things and the people they care about." God doesn't think this is true, so God agrees to let Satan hurt Job, as long as he doesn't kill him. Soon Job is covered in painful, disgusting, puss-filled sores from his head to his toes. But still he won't turn against God. Everyone around Job--his wife and his friends-- think this is God's fault and tell Job that God must be punishing him for something bad he has done. Job wishes he had never been born, he questions his whole life, and he wallows in his misery, but still he won't blame God.

Finally, Job turns to God. He says, "Lord, why is this happening to me? Aren't I good person? Why are so many bad things happening to me? Don't you care about me?" Job asks God one of my favorite theological questions: Why me?

The good news is that God has a response for Job. The bad news is that it's not what Job wants to hear. I imagine that Job wants to hear what we all do when we ask that question—we want God to say, "You're right! I'm so sorry. I'm a chump. I really dropped the ball on protecting you. Thank you for pointing that out and I'll make sure it doesn't happen again." We want an answer that is both definitive and doesn't require any more reflection or understanding from us. We want the simple answer, the clear reasoning.

God doesn't give that answer. Instead, God turns the table and begins questioning Job. God says, "Job, are you really asking me if I care about you? Are you really asking if I look after you? Who do you think created the foundation of the earth? Who shaped the mountains and the valleys and determined how long the deserts would be and where the ocean would begin and end?" We only read a few verses, but God continues talking for a total of 129 verses across four

chapters. If I were to read the whole response we'd have to order in for lunch because we'd be here past noon. In fact, it is the longest soliloquy attributed to God in the entire Bible.

A lot of the stories we read in Scripture have the humans talking. We're complaining, we're confused, we're hurt, we're uncertain, and above all else—we're questioning God. We're asking God, “What do you want from me? Who am I? What's the purpose of life? What's going to happen to me? Where are you, God? Are you listening?” And if you read the scriptures, there are plenty of answers, but Job 38 is the answer to end all answers. It is God's alpha and omega of an answer.

The descriptions of creation and God's role as creator and sustainer are incredibly beautiful. They are poetry. But when you are suffering, and when you have just cried out, “Why me, O Lord?! Why me?!” you don't want to hear about the storehouses of the snow or young lions learning how to hunt or mountain goats giving birth. In fact, mountain goats giving birth are probably the last possible things you want to hear about from God.

If you're Job, and you've demanded hard answers from the God you have been steadfast and faithful to, this response would be incredibly unsatisfying. It might even be painful to hear. If I was Job, I would be shaking my fist saying, “That's not what I wanted you to say to me!” And God would reply, “You asked for the truth, and I'm giving it to you! It's not my fault you can't understand it!” And then I would get frustrated and indignant and stomp through the fields, muttering about birthing mountain goats, until I reached my house and slammed the front door shut and refused to talk to God for the rest of the week.

If we move forward in time and space until we reach today, we still don't have a satisfying answer from God. We're still asking that same question. Why me? Why us? As hard as I've tried in my own life, I've never been able to come up with a satisfying answer to the Why

me? question. I don't suppose I, or any other pastor or preacher or prophet or priest, will ever be able to trump God's answer. We saw what Job received when he demanded an answer from God—I don't think I'm going to get anything better than what he got. But, maybe the point isn't in trying to make God's infuriatingly poetic answer fit our question. Maybe that's not the point of this story. Maybe the point is something different altogether.

Maybe what we are supposed to take away from God's answer is a combination of humility and awe.

We often describe the Bible as a book full of stories about humans trying to figure out the meaning of life and their relationship to God. For a book that is so focused on humanity, it is telling that God's longest monologue has nothing to do with humans. Talk about humbling. It's not all about me, after all. Even when it feels like the world is crumbling around me, it's still not all about me.

God's answer pointing away from Job and toward the rest of creation reminds me of all that I don't know. I don't know how to give a horse its strength or how to make a locust leap or how to give a trumpet the sound of its horn. And I'm not supposed to. I'm not God. I'm not the Creator of the earth. I'm not the sustainer of life. I'm not the redeemer of all humanity. I'm not God, and I don't want to be. God's response reminds me of this in a powerful way. It also reminds me that God isn't asking us to be God. All we have to do is be our human selves. Thank goodness. I would make a lousy God. And when I read of all the things that God looks after and all the different parts of creation—it boggles my mind. It humbles me. It leaves me in awe.

The awe comes in the reminder that even though I don't understand how everything fits together or how every part of creation works, God does. The details in God's response to Job inspires awe in me because there are details in there that I have never even thought about before.

One of my favorite passages of it comes later in chapter 39, God says: “Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars, and spreads its wings toward the south? Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up and makes its nest on high? It lives on the rock and makes it home on the fastness of the rocky crag. From there it spies the prey; its eyes see it from far away. Its young ones suck up blood; and where the slain are, there it is.” Wow! That makes me want to say, “Holy God, tell me more! I want to know about the hawk and about the eagle and about every bird in the sky. Tell me more!” It is pure awe – wonder that inspires and moves you to a deeper understanding of the infinite strength and power of God.

That awe reminds me that even if I don’t get the answer I am looking for, our Creator is at work in the world in a way that extends beyond my knowing, beyond my imagination, beyond what I can ever understand.

What if, through awe, we are able to find comfort in the fact that even though we don't always receive the answers we want to hear, or even though we don't fully understand why things happen to us, God is fully at work, weaving our story into the rest of creation, caring for us and creating life in us. What if, for awhile, we can step away from needing all the answers, and just approach God with awe and humility – grateful that we are not tasked with that immense role, and grateful that the one who is does so with compassion, care, and creativity.

God does not tell Job why he suffered, or why any of us suffer. But God does tell Job something important. When Job says, “Did you cause this suffering?” God points toward life. Toward birth and creation and interconnectedness. To me, today, that means that when I am looking for God, in the midst of whatever suffering is brought on to me, I might have a better chance of finding God when I am reminded of the persistence of life, when I am reminded of connections of care, when I am reminded of the interdependence of all of creation of which I am

a tiny, tiny part, but which I am a part of all the same. God is there. Weaving us together.

Birthing us anew. Feeding and nurturing us. Perhaps instead of having to understand how it all happens or what it all means, we can sit in humility and awe for the fact that it happens at all.

Amen.