

JOB 38 – 42

1) Job finally gets his encounter with God but not in the way he had envisioned it. Job experiences God coming to him in a whirlwind (visible sign of power) immediately putting Job at a disadvantage (Job is afraid). God is the one who will do the questioning and it is time for Job to offer God some answers (38:3, 40:6)

2) God confronts Job with the limits of Job's knowledge and understanding (38:4-7) as well as the limits of his powers (vs.8-11). Job is humbled not because he is a bad sinner (according to the traditional faith). He is humbled because he is made aware of how ignorant he is and how limited in knowledge in the face of the wild wonders of the universe.

3) Throughout 38:1 - 40:2, humans are never mentioned. God wants to show Job that the universe can exist quite well without him. Thus, by inference, existence is a gift and can never be taken for granted, and Job exists because God has not only made it possible, but mastered the forces of a vast universe in order to make a place for him. God's whole speech is intended to expose the great gulf between Job's limited power and authority as compared to God's. No wonder Job has little to say in response. (40:4-5)

4) God rebukes Job for interpreting events in such a way as to put God on trial. Job has a) accused God of perverting justice and b) implied God must plead guilty in order for Job to be justified. But from God's point of view, Job should know better. God never acts unjustly no matter how things appear. God expects Job to have a little more faith in God. Job has been willing to sacrifice God's name in order to justify his own. God's response is: OK then, if you can do it better, go ahead!

God then challenges Job with what he must do in order to match God (40: 10-14). Not only must Job limit the evil perpetrated by the wicked, he must also control Leviathan (41:1-5). Leviathan is equated with chaos which existed before creation and often associated with the sea and its monsters. One view of creation theology held God as in constant battle with chaos keeping it back from destroying the earth and its creatures. God not only creates but keeps chaos in its place.

5) God pushes Job to rethink his view of God in this way: God is not limited by human understandings of justice. To understand God's justice one must look beyond one's situation and consider that God is the author of all that is. Once God is seen as the creator and sustainer of the whole universe it is more difficult to fault God when things don't work out fairly in one's particular life. Suffering is not a personal assault by God. It is simply part of the larger ebb and flow of a vast universe of which humans are but a small part.

6) This also means that Job's friends are wrong to draw Job into a vicious cycle where God is the punisher and Job the sinner. As a man of integrity, Job has no choice but to respond that he is not guilty of what he is accused of. If it is all God's doing then God is guilty of abusing an innocent man. But God's response to Job is not to answer Job's why or to address Job's concerns as he has framed them. God doesn't answer Job's why. There is no answer to why. God's challenge to Job is to live with that reality and still find his way to a more intimate relationship to his creator, redeemer God. The alternative is to remain where Job and his friends have been, namely, in the belief that life is about you and only you. Whatever happens in the world and in your life is a personal communication by God to you. But, God's response is to suggest that divine providence is bigger than that. The task is to find our place in God's world and to live within God's larger love in spite of all the wounds we carry. Our wounds should not tear us away from God but bring us closer to God realizing our fragility and need of a source of strength and wisdom greater than us.

7) All the characters in this story believe that Job is abandoned by God, even though they disagree as to why. The 3 friends believe Job has sinned and so he is suffering as a direct result. Elihu shifts the focus from Job to God but also accuses Job of not humbling himself before God. God is always right and humans always wrong. Job, however, argues that if God is punishing him, God is wrong to do so, and if this is the way God runs the universe, it is unfair. From God's perspective as we have it here, Job has never been cut off from God except through his own flawed image of God. God can still be experienced in the presence of suffering even if one is not able to understand the cause of the suffering.

8) For Christians, not only is God with us now, but we await a future where all wrongs will be made right - not by retaliatory vengeance, but by the truth being exposed and our right vindicated. We live in the present from the perspective of eternity and our fidelity to and hope in eternity. We also live with a belief in the eternal communion of the saints (our meeting in this life is not all there is).

9) 42: 1-6 reveals a total transformation in Job's perspective and disposition. Before, Job's truth was his innocence and God's guilt. Now, he confesses how foolish and ignorant he has been. Why such a change? Job has had a fresh encounter with God and this encounter brings him to his knees before it raises him to new heights. But why to his knees? Is this an admission of wrong? Job is not wrong in what he had argued against his friends. He had done nothing wrong to merit his relatively sudden and overwhelming misfortunes. But his inference about God and God's nature as well as his ignorant way of speaking about God was wrong. God is not the author of evil. God is the author of a wonderful, mysterious, awesome world where there is freedom and limits, wonderful room for adventure, but also the reality of suffering and injustice as various forms of life come into collision. But only an encounter with God could have revealed this larger perspective to Job. His friends were so sure of their legalistic framework of faith in God and the way the world works, that they could not be true companions to Job in his pain, nor could they be open to deeper wisdom about the truth of things.

10) And so, is Job guilty or innocent? On the one hand, by his own admission, Job has jumped to conclusions about God ignorant of larger truths about God and God's ways in the world. (42:2-3) On the other hand, Job is innocent of having committed the kinds of wrongs that we would normally associate with resulting misfortunes. His 3 friends insist that Job confess to his sin. Elihu ignores Job's pain and insists that Job humble himself before God. Job's way of being faithful is to continue to call on God but in total, unmitigated honesty - complaining angrily, lamenting sorrowfully, questioning, challenging God, but never, never, giving up on God. Job keeps a part of himself open, open to some new vision of what God may be like and what relationship with God could be like. He keeps a part of himself open to what healing, wholeness and oneness with God could be like. His friends, on the other hand, are closed to the new because they have it all figured out. Here is true arrogance. They receive their 'reward.' God vindicates Job and condemns them.

11) God's vindication of Job is further vindicated by Job's graciousness on behalf of his friends. He prays for their forgiveness, and his prayer alone God will accept. In his suffering Job has learned mercy, although, as he claims in his defense (chap. 29, 31), mercy has been central to his integrity and commitment all along.

12) The why of suffering is never answered. The answer we get from the story of Job is a relationship with God on a whole new level, where our whole outlook on life and the world changes and we are changed as human beings accordingly. Our wounds continue to remain with us as the risen Christ continued to bear the scars of his crucifixion in his resurrected state. But God is able to take up our wounds and through them, open up new avenues for compassion for others and fullness in ourselves, to find deeper roots. It is a real mystery how this happens. But people of faith experience this.

13) Job's fortunes are restored. But much more important is the healing in his heart. He is able to trust again, to build again, to find joy in life again, to love again, even when he has become shockingly aware of the fragility and vulnerability of all precious things in this life. This is God's further answer to why. It isn't a direct answer. But the newness we experience makes our "whys" less important and no longer an impediment to finding some heaven on earth.