

The Sin of Certainty
Job 38:1-7, 34-41
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There is a system for treating injured victims used by emergency workers to determine their degree of consciousness. The maximum level is known as “alert and oriented times four.” That tells the rescuer that the patient knows who he is, where he is, what time it is, and what just happened. If they have suffered any kind of head trauma, they may not remember what just happened. That would be “alert and oriented times three.” In the most severe cases, the injured sailor may not be able to tell you who they are. He would be “alert and oriented times zero.” It would apply to someone who no longer understood who they were, where they were, what time it is, or understand what just happened. All they know is that they exist – everything else seems secondary. This is where we find Job in the 38th chapter of this epic poem. Everything that told him something about his identity is gone. He is no longer a father – his ten children died when the roof of the building where they were celebrating one of the brother’s birthdays collapsed. He is no longer a respected and wealthy man all of his servants, his livestock and his crops were swept away in a storm. His friends have accused him of all sorts of misconduct. He cannot even find God any longer.

All of his attempts to orient himself have fallen short. He had questions. He wanted his day in court. He believed in justice and he was certain he was blameless. He was certain God had made a mistake. He demanded that God appear. In ten speeches, he has accused God of everything from making a simple error to total divine mismanagement. Scholars believe that if you follow the patterns of the speeches, there was once an eleventh speech that some ancient authority found so inflammatory and heretical, that it was eliminated from the book. I have met people who are that angry with God. They have tragically lost a child or a spouse and some well-intended person told them that God needed their lost one more than they did. I would be angry at God, too, if I believed that. Job was so disoriented that Job no longer knew what it was to be Job anymore and he blamed God for that. His friends tell him to be quiet – to repent – to lose his expectations that God would listen to anything he had to say.

Given this tension between Job and his friends, you know God eventually has to reenter the story and God does. It is not through a quiet burning bush or a whisper in a breeze. God makes it very clear that it is the Almighty who has come to call. God comes in a whirlwind and challenges Job to stand tall and take it like a man or for those of you who are the Devil Wears Prada fans, gird your loins, Job. Job has been asking questions and demanding that God supply answers but God has a few questions God wants Job to answer first. God challenges Job – God wants to see if Job knows as much as he is claiming to know about how things work.

I want to give you a big picture view of God’s speech to Job. In the first section, God gives Job a lesson in meteorology, in astrology, and zoology. God demands that Job tell God how the world works. Does Job know how to make the sun rise? Does Job know how death works? Can Job’s wisdom make a drop of rain fall or feed a lion in the wild? God’s lengthy speech points Job to a world that is far more complex than any world within Job’s grasp. In fact, Job’s lesson in zoology spoke of creatures that have little to do with humanity. They are creatures of the wild – the raven, the lion, the ostrich, the wild ox, and the hawk. Job’s friends tried to convince Job that the world is a simple place. It is a nice place where nice guys finish first. God is reminding Job that it is a wild place with complex relationships.

God ends this first speech with a demand. Since Job has accused God of divine mismanagement, then Job must respond to God's lesson on cosmic realities. Job simply replies that he has nothing to say. God's speech has fallen on deaf ears. Job's questions did not have anything to do with astrology or zoology or meteorology. Job's questions had to do with justice. Job wanted to talk about right and wrong but God is talking about creativity. Job wants to talk about his personal case. God wants to talk about cosmic forces. Job's questions were not really asking "Why?" Job's questions were asking "Why me?" Job at this point was probably even more disoriented than he had been before. What did anything that God is saying have to do with Job's suffering?

Once again, God calls for Job to "Gird his loins. This time, God puts a question to Job – does one of us have to be wrong? Does God have to be wrong for Job to be right? God does not chastise Job for asserting his innocence. God does not admonish Job for defending his own integrity. God goes on to speak of two terrifying creatures that God created but God and God alone keeps within safe boundaries. Maybe, just maybe, the whole world was not designed with a human understanding of winners and losers. Maybe there is a more complex design of relationships that Job has never considered.

If you want to simplify God's speech to Job, you might do it this way. God comes to Job through a mighty storm and says, "Job, I've got good news for you and I've got bad news for you." Job looks at God and says, "Let's get the bad news over with first." God replies, "Job, the bad news is that you are not in the center of the universe." Then God smiles and goes on, "And Job, the good news is that you are not in the center of the universe."

Once upon a time, Job could tell you who he was, where he was, what time it was, and what was happening around him because Job knew that God was in the center of the universe. The more Job suffered, the less oriented he became until he had placed himself in the center of the universe. Everything evolved around Job. His worldview was limited to his relationship to everything around him. There was nothing any bigger than Job. Job could make his own world as simple or complex and he chose. Unfortunately, this is one of the side effects of suffering. It can also be a side effects of power. We lose track of the greater story. Everything is about us. We are the center of our own universe. Everything that anyone says or does is related to us. Psychologists call this narcissism.

God's answer to Job sounds harsh and insensitive. The English author, Virginia Woolf, was reported to have said, "I read the book of Job. I don't think God comes out too well in it." If Job is at the center of the universe, she is absolutely right. Most of us have deep sympathies with Job. We relate to someone who seems to have lost everything. Job's questions are our questions. We wonder why a soldier dies on the way home to attend his mother's funeral. We question why someone would hate our culture enough to fly airplanes into buildings. We ask ourselves why people trying to do the right thing are maimed or injured. And we have witnessed what power has done to many. There are great spiritual leaders we all admire who turn out to be sexual predators. There are now classes of extremely wealthy individuals who live outside the boundaries of what is good and decent. All of us know families who have been struck by one tragedy after another and we question it. But then, our questions intensify when we become the victim. We wonder when the question is why – we become demanding when the question turns to why me?

Let's get honest for a moment about our lives. How many of us wake up every morning alert and oriented times four? We are certain about who we are. We are certain about where we are. We are certain about what time it is in our lives. We can tell you what is happening around us. It is easy to look like we have all the answers on the surface but wasn't there a time during the week when you shook your head and asked, "What is the world is going on here?" Do you ever look in the mirror and wonder who that is staring back at you? Do you look around you and ask how in the world did I get in the mess? Do you look at the calendar and think, "where has my day gone or worse, where has life gone?" I do. Each and every day. When things are going well, I do have God at the center of the universe but just let events begin spinning out of control and I am just like Job asking, "Why me?"

Yes, God's answer seems uncaring to a man who has just buried ten children but it is the only answer that works. In a world that we cannot comprehend, isn't it good to know that there is a God who does understand what is happening? Isn't it good to know that God through divine creativity can provide in all things – both in successes and failures?

For our young people graduating today – faith is not certainty. Faith is knowing that even those you do not understand the events surrounding you, you believe God is with us. Having doubts about the ways God works is healthy because we were meant to ask questions. We were meant to learn, and grow, and mature in our faith all the years of our lives. Do not strive for certainty – strive for integrity, for honesty, for curiosity, and for justice.

I get calls every week from people from all walks of life, young and old, who through some event, have had their world shaken. They are and oriented times zero. The doctor has told them their cancer is terminal. They have just lost a job they love. Their child does not come home one night. Their spouse has walked out. When life has made us alert and oriented times zero, how can we get oriented again? I think we as Christians need to add an alert times five to our categories of consciousness. "Where is God?" needs to be a dominant question because until you know where God is in the midst of your life, the other answers will never make sense.

The book of Job begins with God's own prosecuting attorney trying to prove that Job does not really know God and hence, does not love God. The prosecutor was right. Job was certain he knew but he did not. Job's friends were certain they knew but they did not either. Job never receives the answers to his questions but he no longer cares. He has seen a God that is beyond his imagination. He has listened to a God who genuinely cares about Job's life and Job's curiosity. Job learns God is. And that is enough for him to have faith.