

The LORD Answers Job

38 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^[a] 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’?

¹²“Have you commanded the morning since your days began,

and caused the dawn to know its place,

¹³so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth,

and the wicked be shaken out of it?

¹⁴It is changed like clay under the seal,

and it is dyed^[b] like a garment.

¹⁵Light is withheld from the wicked,

and their uplifted arm is broken.

¹⁶ "Have you entered into the springs of the sea,
or walked in the recesses of the deep?
¹⁷ Have the gates of death been revealed to you,
or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?
¹⁸ Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?
Declare, if you know all this.

¹⁹ "Where is the way to the dwelling of light,
and where is the place of darkness,
²⁰ that you may take it to its territory
and that you may discern the paths to its home?
²¹ Surely you know, for you were born then,
and the number of your days is great!

²² "Have you entered the storehouses of the snow,
or have you seen the storehouses of the hail,
²³ which I have reserved for the time of trouble,
for the day of battle and war?
²⁴ What is the way to the place where the light is distributed,
or where the east wind is scattered upon the earth?

²⁵ "Who has cut a channel for the torrents of rain,
and a way for the thunderbolt,
²⁶ to bring rain on a land where no one lives,
on the desert, which is empty of human life,
²⁷ to satisfy the waste and desolate land,
and to make the ground put forth grass?

²⁸ "Has the rain a father,
or who has begotten the drops of dew?
²⁹ From whose womb did the ice come forth,
and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of heaven?
³⁰ The waters become hard like stone,
and the face of the deep is frozen.

- ³¹ "Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades,
or loose the cords of Orion?
- ³² Can you lead forth the Mazzaroth in their season,
or can you guide the Bear with its children?
- ³³ Do you know the ordinances of the heavens?
Can you establish their rule on the earth?
- ³⁴ "Can you lift up your voice to the clouds,
so that a flood of waters may cover you?
- ³⁵ Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go
and say to you, 'Here we are'?
- ³⁶ Who has put wisdom in the inward parts,^[c]
or given understanding to the mind?^[d]
- ³⁷ Who has the wisdom to number the clouds?
Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens,
- ³⁸ when the dust runs into a mass
and the clods cling together?
- ³⁹ "Can you hunt the prey for the lion,
or satisfy the appetite of the young lions,
- ⁴⁰ when they crouch in their dens,
or lie in wait in their covert?
- ⁴¹ Who provides for the raven its prey,
when its young ones cry to God,
and wander about for lack of food?

Mark 10:35-45 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Request of James and John

³⁵James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." ³⁶And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" ³⁷And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." ³⁸But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" ³⁹They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; ⁴⁰but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

⁴¹When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. ⁴²So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ⁴³But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

October 21, 2018

Job 38, Mark 10:35-45

“Who Do You Think You Are?” (A good “Reformed Theology” question)

Kerra Becker English

I'm a little ahead of myself this week. Next Sunday is officially Reformation Sunday, but this week's texts lend themselves to asking a really good Reformed Theology question which has become the title of this sermon, “Who do you think you are?” So, TODAY, a week early, we'll sing Reformation era hymns from Luther and Calvin and ponder the contrast of our flawed humanity compared to God's overwhelming goodness and power, OK?

Who do you think you are – James and John? What makes you so special as to think you'd be given the premium VIP seats right next to Jesus at the very best table in the afterlife?

Who do you think you are – Job? What makes you think that you deserve anything in this life more or less so than anyone else? What makes you think you could argue your piddly case of suffering before God, and win?

God and God's son give no lighthearted answers when it comes to foolish human questions. In responding to Job, God starts out by telling him that he'd better tighten up his underwear because this answer is going to get real. And Jesus suffers no fools like James and John, beginning his response by telling them they don't have any clue what they are asking. Buckle up. Put on your best adulting face. And get ready to get smacked with a hearty dose of spiritual reality kiddos, because when we begin to think we are special in front of the holy of holies, then we best prepare ourselves for a schooling.

That's one of the things the Protestant Reformation got right. It looked back on those biblical times when God was being God, and the only adequate human response was to get the heck

out of the way. Who do you think you are? Some high and mighty human? A priest? A powerful King? The Lord of your own castle? Better think again! The reformers remind us that we all stand equal in our fear and trembling before the Almighty. It's the hard look at our own sinfulness and depravity that Calvin was so good at spinning into amazing sentences about how awful humankind can be. Here's one from the very opening paragraphs of his Institutes. He writes, *"For, as a veritable world of miseries is to be found in mankind, and we are thereby despoiled of divine raiment, our shameful nakedness exposes a teeming horde of infamies. Each of us must, then be so stung by the consciousness of his own unhappiness as to attain at least some knowledge of God."*

Calvin believed it would be in the recognition of our own ignorance, vanity, poverty, or infirmity, and in the scandals of our own depravity and corruption that we would recognize the true light of wisdom and find our connection to God. Really. He thought that's how it would go down. And I do think there's some truth to what he was saying. To think of ourselves too highly, like to ask for and expect a seat at Jesus' VIP table, is to miss some of the finer points about who God is. It also doesn't play well with our friends when we cozy up to Jesus for a good spot, and leave another 10 friends behind. So, in this particular biblical example Jesus and Calvin would have been on the same page here. James and John needed to be taught a lesson about their own self-importance. They needed to know that discipleship would be more likely the cause of their pain, than any reason for their glory. Be baptized as I'm baptized, yes. Drink the cup I drink, yes. But to be glorified by it – I'm not thinking so.

My hunch is that Calvin was somewhat of a fanboy of Job as well. At least that's how I imagine Calvin thinking about his life. The stuff that we have can easily be given and easily be taken away. He probably thought of Job's friends as terrible theologians, and they are. They blame Job. They blame God. They curse this and that, and try to get Job to do the right amount of penance,

and for what? It is in seeing that he is no different from any other creature that Job gets God's attention, and God lets him bear direct witness to the power and authority that can only be ascribed to the Almighty. As scary as that is, it's also pretty cool. God gets the best soliloquy in the book of Job about how God's power is absolutely all that, and humans are pretty low on the list for what they are able to actually do. This is classic Calvinism at its best – seeing the lowly worm-like nature of human existence, and using it as an opportunity to point toward all the magnificent splendor that is God.

Who do you think you are? If you came here today thinking that you are important, or powerful, or even well-liked among your peers, this story from Mark is an unfortunate corrective to that kind of thinking. James and John walk right into that trap. If you want to think of yourself as greatest of all, among the Gentiles, the ones who are called “greatest” are the tyrants, the rulers who would just as soon squash the little guy to keep their own power intact. If you want to be like that – keep asking to be seated where your own ego will be glorified. BUT, and it's a big *but* here, BUT if you want to be greatest among my disciples, Jesus says, be the servant of all, the slave of all. Be the one who scorns greatness, who takes care of everyone else first. That's what the Son of Man came to do. Weird isn't it? The Almighty God becomes the suffering servant, the sacrifice given so we might be able to recognize our own pride and arrogance and give it all up.

And yet, we still are known to construct hierarchies of spiritual sanctimoniousness, seating ourselves at the best tables Christianity has to offer. You can still hear Job's friends in the world telling us that wealth and good fortune are absolutely God's blessings, and if you don't have it all, God must be cursing you. You can still hear of Christians, not unlike James and John, vying for the approval of princes and powers hoping for a trophy of their discipleship to place on the mantle. It's

all out there. And Jesus tells us, quite plainly, that nothing like that will get us even close to holding on to the keys to the kingdom.

To witness the power of the Almighty God is to understand our place in the world as smaller and less significant than we might want it to be. That's why the aha moment of spiritual awakening can happen looking at the vastness of the night sky. It's all so magnificent as to how it's put together, and we only understand the tiniest fractions of how it all works, even with the scientific knowledge we've gained since God sat Job down for a little talk about being the Creator of absolutely all there is in this Universe. That's why the aha moment of spiritual awakening can also be like Calvin imagined it, occurring at that very moment when we recognize how deep we are into our own ignorance, vanity, poverty, sickness, shamefulness, or corruption. When we hit the low point of our lives, sometimes we can't help ourselves but look up. So, if you want to experience spiritual greatness? It may help to set your sights as small as you possibly can.

This is good news for those of us who live life a little closer to the margins in whatever ways we happen to do that. We don't have to be shiny, happy, positive thinking, successful Christians to experience tremendous gratitude for who God is. In fact, experiencing a little of the depressing Calvinistic side of life is a good dose of perspective. It keeps us humble as we still live in a world where rulers and tyrants that get called "great" all the time. Being "great" may not be quite as awesome as aspiring to being "good." Share the goodness God has for all people – through love, through service, and then you will recognize that we stand before God all the same.

Now I realize that this sermon is a bit of a twist from my more common preaching themes. I consider myself an aspiring Mister Rogers Christian who is going to, most of the time, tell you how loved and wonderful you are, especially in God's eyes. There is a tension here that is not lost on me as I harken back to my very specific theological training that comes out of both Reformed Theology

and the biblical roots that remind us repeatedly that God is God and we are not God. There is a danger, a theological danger, in getting too chummy with God. We aren't God. We aren't even gods of our own making. We are human, fallible and frail. Our ways of ordering the world aren't God's ways of ordering the world, and we ought not forget that as we stand with our "shameful nakedness exposing a teeming horde of infamies." God did not love Job any less. Jesus did not love James and John any less. And yet, their words were not lost on these biblical foils of human pride getting in the way. Again! As much as God is love, God is also the mighty fortress, the sure redeemer, the faithful provider, things we are not. Singing these old hymns written to exemplify God's complete and utter difference from humanity is a good thing for us to do – to remind us that it is in our smallness, our weakness, our ineptitude that we know a power greater than ourselves in who God is. Let God be great. Be content to be good. Amen.