

Praying in the Dark
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Our reading for today comes to us--again—from the book of Job, chapter 38 (1-7). Let us listen for what the Spirit may be saying to the church today:

Job 38:1-7

1 Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind:
2 "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?
3 Gird 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.
5 Who determined its measurements--surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it?
6 On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone
7 when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?
(there's more to God's answer than that—several chapters more—but we'll stop there for now)

About fifteen years ago, I woke up one morning with every lymph node in my body blown up like a bad birthday balloon. Full body pain grew until it was incapacitating. And then, my six year old daughter swelled up along with me. And unlike Job, my flocks of sheep and goats were never really at risk, but my financial security was momentarily threatened when my insurance company tried to cut us off—insurance, as we all know, is for the healthy not the sick. Before long, I was too sick to fight, too sick to read, too sick even for the intellectual challenge of daytime soap operas. All I could really do was to lay there. And listen. For days. And I'm pretty sure somewhere along the line, without my even knowing or intending it, my listening became prayer. I was too sick to analyze or theologize, and definitely too sick to challenge God. But I do think I turned God-ward, with a prayer that went something like this: **HUH?**

Now Job, to be sure, had lost far more than his health. He'd lost fabulous wealth, his entire family (except his nagging spouse), and his social status as a powerful patriarch and figure of great respect. He'd lost it all--including his entire worldview. Job and his friends had all been shaped in the belief that there *is* order in the moral universe, order that was timely, logical, and predictable: God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. It is a view well supported in our scriptures--see Proverbs, for example, where wisdom, virtuous life and success are virtually inseparable—it's also a view, I would suggest, that's alive and well today. I mean, if you work hard and do good, you'll have a good life, good kids, a good marriage—right? And if you don't you've done something wrong. This is precisely the perspective of his so-called friends who insist that Job must have earned his terrible suffering. He must have sinned and so he should repent, confess and claim his identity, as one friend puts it, as maggot and worm. And seriously, doesn't this also describe too much of Western Christianity today? "You're a maggot and worm, but God loves you anyway."

Job will have none of it. He refuses the pious platitudes of his friends, vehemently protests suffering, in his own life and the injustices that he sees around him. Based solely on *his own experience and his own clear-eyed observation of the world around and within him*, he rejects the entire tradition that equates success with righteousness and suffering with sin. And Job demands from God an accounting. Although universally associated with patience—as in "the patience of Job"--a more apt and more accurate descriptor would be "steadfast." Job is steadfast—which is to say, dedicated, firm, and unwavering--not in passive acceptance, but in relentless protest to, and pursuit of, God.

Job's protest is really a kind of prayer. It is not passive or pious but it is persistent and passionate, authentic and relational. One imagines that Job did not fold his hands, bow his head and get on his knees, but stood up, shouting and shaking his fists at the heavens. Old Testament scholar Samuel Balentine writes, "with language that has no equal in Hebraic prayer, Job lashes out at God for crushing him... it is a measure of Job's relentless pursuit of dialogue with God that in the midst of his most stringent attacks he nevertheless maintains his trust in God's ultimate attention to his plight. The most urgent of all his petitions is the plea for encounter with God."*

Job's friends talk a lot *about* God, they occupy themselves theologizing, sermonizing and criticizing, but they never really *seek* God. They talk about prayer, but they never pray. Job, in a sense, never stops praying, never gives up his questions, and never lets go of his ultimate desire for God.

The mystics tell us that it is precisely in desire, in our longing for justice, for Goodness, for God, that we can be most assured of God's living presence in our lives. We long for what we've already known. The German theologian Karl Rahner insisted that grace, experience of grace, what he called God's self-communication is at the heart of each and every human being—in the mode of offer. To pray is to respond. To pray, in a sense, is to be—we pray not because we ought, but because we are, so the most authentic prayer comes from where we are. It is the substance, content and means of our relationship with a God who is always already there, closer to us than our next breath, but always beyond comprehension. The invitation is to pray our lives, our whole lives; and Rahner insisted that if we perceive grace in joy and beauty—which we all do, or at least can--it may be even more powerfully present in darkness and in longing if we just stay *in* it long enough.

All of which brings us to today's lesson. *The Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind.* The Lord answered Job. Job does not exactly get what he came for—answers to the eternal question of human suffering. What he gets is a whirlwind. More questions. And, a cosmic recounting of creation, a glimpse of a God's eye view of an infinitely creative universe, where neither Job nor the human race occupies center stage, but where both are players. And Job encounters a God who is not some patriarch writ large, some cosmic accountant, tallying up good deeds and dispensing prizes, some puppet master dropping difficulty down to make stronger people, but rather wind, breath, life-giving Spirit. And one imagines that for Job that whirlwind was not the end but just the beginning.

The answers to my anguished prayer all those years ago—HUH?— are definitely still unfolding. Concrete and immediate answers, included the fact that we had contracted cat scratch fever, which is indeed more than a bad rock and roll song, it is also a serious disease of the immune system, caused, I am not making this up, by a pathogen carried only by kittens. Talk about creation putting you in your proper place.

A memorable reminder that we are all just a little skin abrasion away from losing everything — health, wealth, security--so be here now, gratefully. And also this: in darkness, confusion, difficulty —right there in the midst of it--there is a Presence. For me, more whisper than whirlwind, but still unmistakable. If I'd been anything less than flat out, I'd have missed it. And following all the bunny trails, all the questions I was given in that experience has led me down a very long road, into a whole new life, and right here to this moment, time and place. That whisper was definitely just a beginning for me and God only knows where it will lead next. But I have surely heard the invitation to pay attention, to listen deeply, to pray always, even if I don't always (or even often!) choose to respond.

All of us, if we pause to reflect can touch into those experiences where we became more consciously aware of something larger at work in our lives and in our world—in delight and difficulty. Rarely a voice from the clouds—you’ve got to be especially wary of those!-- more often wind, whisper, an intuition that won’t let go, an imaginative leap that opens up a whole new horizon, a kind word given or received, a new challenge, miraculous moments of reconciliation. The more we look, the more we notice. The more we notice, the more we look. And maybe we’ll even be moved to invite God to look with us. This, too, is a kind of prayer, where we seek to remain open to the possibility of God and to God’s possibilities right in our own lives, our work, our families, our community, our world. If not there, where? And, in a community of prayer, we get to do that together. We help each other remain open to the possibility of God and to God’s possibilities, in darkness and delight, in passion and perplexity, in whispers and whirlwinds, right here and right now, for our own sakes and for the sake of a world as dark and desperate for a glimpse of God as Job. May it be so.

*Samuel E. Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of Divine-Human Dialogue* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 175.