

Where Job and the Wild Things Are

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Job 42:1-6, 10-17

Mark 1:12-13

[I have looked forward to this day since the time we ministered to each other in the wake of 9/11 over eight years ago. If 9/11 inaugurated a new era of fear in our country, then 9/16 began a new era of hope.]

I know you have been wrestling with the book of Job for most of this month, and now we've come to its conclusion. Finally. So ends the painful, thrilling, exhausting, turgid and turbulent story of Job. Job the patient, Job the impatient. Job reduced to stunned silence, Job provoked to explode with words of blasphemy. Devastated, bitter, traumatized, Job is now restored, and with a new family no less. In my estimation, the book of Job is the closest thing to a thought experiment in the Bible. It is a what-if story: what if God chose to test a man's moral mettle with devastating consequences? What if the world isn't set up to reward the righteous and afflict the wicked? What would righteousness look like in a world in which bad things happen to good people? And have you ever thought of how Job lived out his remaining 140 years? The narrator invites us to imagine. Was Job blissfully happy, or were there occasions when he broke down with deep grief for his dead children. Did he begin his new family in fear that disaster could strike once again? You see, Job did not know what in the world was going on in heaven when he faced his harrowing test, a wager between God and that wily prosecuting attorney and member of the heavenly council the satan, otherwise known as the "adversary."

It's fitting that this adversarial figure makes no appearance in the end, in this epilogue, for Job now takes center stage, vindicated and restored. Scholars are divided as to the significance of the epilogue. It is, to be sure, a happy ending. Some consider it a sort of Hollywood happy ending, artificial and contrived. Wouldn't it be better if the book had simply finished with Job's cowering words: "Therefore I despise myself, and repent in

dust and ashes"? Maybe that is how the book originally ended, but perhaps the first "test audiences" were left unsatisfied and objected. "This is too negative!" they cried out, "Is Job simply left to die on his ash heap?" And so this prose ending was added. You know that's done with a lot of movies these days. An unsatisfying ending can lead to a rewrite of the script and a reshoot of the last scene. But this "happy ending" was added at a cost: it ironically vindicated the friends, who had all along been saying that a person's fate was directly tied to his or her moral integrity, or lack thereof. And now, *because* he was proved innocent, Job is blessed by God. But the poetic dialogues all along, culminating with God's answer to Job, had severed any connection between sin and punishment, or conversely between moral conduct and blessing. We live in a world in which the rain falls on the just and the unjust, on the righteous and the unrighteous, to quote another sage, Jesus (Matt 5:45).

And speaking of rain, Job is earlier shown that God has cut a channel for the torrents of rain, and a way for the thunderbolt, to bring rain on a land where no one lives, on the desert, which is empty of human life, to satisfy the waste and desolate land, and to make the ground put forth grass. (38:26-27)

Rain is a sign of God's care and providence that extends well beyond the human norms of justice and cultural convention. God has a mind even for those places that are devoid of human contact, "empty of human life." And yet, even there, God sends the nourishing rain to bring forth new life.

But back to Job. What is it that Job has seen and heard from God that would take him to this point, speechless and in awe? And what is it that propels him to start a new family? When Job encounters the God of the whirlwind, he is given a God's-eye view of creation's extremities or margins, regions primarily untouched or at least uncontrolled by human habit and habitation, a world exploding with new horizons. Like the spirit that drives Jesus into the wilderness to be ministered there, God takes Job on a far flung tour, a roller coaster ride to the ends of creation, from "the gates of death" to Leviathan's underbelly. Through the power of poetry, God takes Job, and the reader, hither and yon, across incalculable distances and depths, spanning the ancient

equivalent of light-years and quantum measurements. Job is taken on a *Wander*, even if he himself has no *Wanderlust*. Whereas the animals in the garden of Eden were brought to Adam to be named, Job is thrust out into the wilderness to experience such animals within their native habitats, and it is there in the wild that he learns their names from God. Job is taken on a field trip in God's Biology Course 101.

So what kind of world does Job behold on his tour? Certainly it is no "cozy cosmos." It is vast and seemingly desolate. Yet far from being barren, creation teems with life characterized by fierce strength, unrequited care, and wild beauty. This world is not an object of divine micromanagement. In this world, freedom reigns. Land, sea, and sky are host to myriad life-forms, all alien to the human eye and untamable to the human hand, but all affirmed and nurtured by God. This God is even the God of monsters (cf. Gen 1:21), particularly two. Their names are Behemoth and Leviathan. This world is God's wild kingdom, and Job is shown where the wild things are. It is a world shot full of "pizzazz."

And what kind of a God is behind this kind of creation? In contemporary terms, the God depicted in Job is one who exhibits passionate "biophilia," which the great biologist E. O. Wilson defines as "the innate pleasure from living abundance and diversity." God, in other words, is a biophile! God exhibits an unbounded love of all living kind, irrespective of form, status, and place in the world, from the lowly wild ass to the regal Leviathan. The God who answers Job lingers lovingly over every entry in the catalogue of creation's *marginalia*, providing the abundant means for food and habitat. God approaches wild life not with a sword but with an open hand. God suffuses creation with a sense of "abiding astonishment," astonishment that God himself holds toward creation. Like a loving parent, this God proudly shows off creation as if every element and animal were her child. Rare it is that we find in the Bible *God* rendering praise to creation rather than the reverse. But so it is in Job. God passionately seeks to be pulled in by nature's "gravitational" attraction, by its beauty and vitality. So much so that God takes on the creatures' point of view, their instincts and their joys, their adaptive strengths and their failures.

And what is Job's place within such a world? On the surface, Job seems bereft of place. He has been shown a "no-man's land." This is no anthropocentric world that God so

loves. The world according to God is not finely tuned to ensure humanity's flourishing, let alone dominion. No, the world is a hodgepodge of life in all its wondrous and repulsive variety. It is a world of "ultimate pluralism," with Job included in the mix. Singling out one particular animal, God says to Job:

Behold Behemoth, which I made *with* you. 40:15a

The clue is in the preposition. Behemoth is created *with* Job. God has now given Job a strange bedfellow, a monstrous twin. Job shares an identity, indeed a *genetic* identity, with this fearsome creature. Job's DNA, as it were, is linked to this lumbering, fearless, playful creature of the wild. Job is no isolated creation, and clearly not the apex of the created order. Rather, he is created along with his monstrous twin, and it is this monster who receives the glorious credit of being born "first" or "best" (Job 40:19). And unlike Jacob, Job has no recourse to steal its birthright. Job finds himself playing second fiddle to Behemoth, a monster, in God's creation.

This, then, is the crux of the Joban "thought experiment": Imagine, if you will, finding out that you are kin to a monster. Not an evil twin, mind you, but a monstrosity nonetheless. Here, the Latin is not *Ecce Homo* ("Behold the man!") but *Ecce Behemoth!* Behold the monster whose loins *are* girded with strength and whose confidence does not shrink before the surge of chaos. What does that say about Job and his relationship to the natural world, stock full of wild and alien creatures? Earlier, Job had complained that he is a "brother of jackals and a companion of ostriches" (30:29), ostracized by friends and family. God has now turned Job's lament into abiding astonishment by showing him that he is actually in good company in the wild. As Job is no island, so humanity is no enclave. Through Job, humanity discovers itself to have been created *of* the world, inextricably linked to all life, including the wild. Job has come to see himself created in the *imago animalis*. As Job is kin to Behemoth, so he is related to all the animals of the wild. Job has discovered the biologist's dictum, "I link, therefore I am."

In other words, God shows Job who he truly is, a stranger in a strange land, an alien in an alien world, but an alien that is kin to all aliens. Job is also shown that God loves the alien. "If you want to see an alien," Harold Kroto, Nobel Prize Winner and Professor of Chemistry at Florida State University, notes, "just look at yourself in the mirror."

Indeed, Job has done so. Job is shown God's world in all its strangeness so that he can discover something about himself, wild thing that he is. It is precisely in his alienness that Job finds kinship. As Job beholds formidable Behemoth, he also sees something of himself. *How To Be An Alien Without The Alienation*. Now that's a book that Job himself could have written. But you wouldn't find it in the self-help section.

And that's the point. God reveals to Job a whole new world, far beyond his imagination, "things too wonderful for him," a world so different and yet one to which he remains inextricably linked. And it is in that world that Job expects to die. Job's final words are not translated accurately in the NRSV: "therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (42:6). Job does not repent, even as he gains a new sense of awe and reverence for the creator. A better translation is: "Therefore I waste away and yet am comforted in dust and ashes." Comforted? You see, Job acknowledges that God has fulfilled for him what his friends failed to do. Job's friends came to console and comfort him, but they failed miserably. They failed Pastoral Counseling 101. But God finally came; God finally responded to Job's pleas and does so to show Job that the world is far bigger, far more wondrous, far more terrifying, far more beautiful than he could ever imagine. And he was comforted. Indeed, he has seen God with his very own eyes and expects to die (see Exodus 33:20).

But God won't let him. Instead, God offers him the opportunity to start anew. But I wonder whether Job welcomed the opportunity with open arms. Did he hesitate, wondering if catastrophe would strike again? I can only imagine. Who would want to risk starting a new family amid such uncertainty? Who would want to start anew after the devastating attacks on 9/11. I suspect, however, that it took a good bit of courage on Job's part to do so, particularly when he would rather have preferred to waste away and die, comforted, as the text states.

For whatever reason, Job chose not to die, at least not then and there. He embraced, perhaps reluctantly, the possibility of new life, of raising a new family. And it was so. A new family for a new Job, a Job transformed. We no longer see Job obsessed over whether his children had secretly cursed God in their hearts, arising early every morning to offer sacrifices on their behalf. Instead, we see a Job who lavished his love on his children, like God lavishing love on the wild things of this earth, and, in so

doing, broke with patriarchal convention. Job did not adhere to the standard ancient practice of giving his inheritance to his sons alone, but shared it equally with his daughters. Indeed, it is his daughters who receive the most attention in the Epilogue. Job is raising a radical family, wild thing that he is. And he does so by modeling God's grace, the grace that was shown him in the wilderness where the wild things roam and play, eat and sleep, reveling in their fierce freedom, all relying upon God's gift, the gift of life. May we, too, revel in that gift, day by day.