

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“God Speaks!”
Thomas G. Speers, III
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Lesson: Job 38:1-7, 34-41

“When all is said and done, it is God who has the final word.”¹ Over the last several weeks we’ve read portions of the Biblical story of Job. Job has offered us an example of a faith of integrity. With Job we have questioned why people suffer and we’ve not received answers. Part of the power of the book is that simple answers are not given, because there are no simple answers to the questions of human suffering. With Job we have discovered that it is appropriate to speak to God in all manner of ways. It is appropriate to be still with God and it is appropriate to be demanding of God, even angry with God. We’ve seen that God doesn’t need to be defended as if God depended on us. Today at long last, God comes on the scene and has the final word.

For a man who has been suffering, it isn’t exactly what we would expect. Out of a whirlwind, God speaks: “Gird up your loins. I’ll do the talking now. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?” It is not very meek or mild, and Job, who throughout this book has not lacked for words, is suddenly silent. The reality of God is much more than we can ever comprehend. We have a long history of making God too small, too predictable, too domesticated and God will not be contained. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?

It reminds me a little bit of a joke that was passed around the internet for a time about people deciding that we don’t need God anymore since we have made so many advances in science and technology. So, one person was sent to tell the Almighty of this decision. “God, we’ve decided that we no longer need you. We’re to the point that we can clone people and do many miraculous things.”

God listened very patiently and kindly and God replied, “Very well, how about this, let’s say we have a person-making contest.” To which the human agreed.

But God added, “Now, we’re going to do this just like I did back in the old days with Adam.”

The person said, “Sure, no problem” and bent down to grab a handful of dirt.

God just looked and said, “No, no, no. You go get your own dirt!” Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?

For someone who has been suffering as Job was, this doesn’t really sound like the best thing to say. God could have been gentler or more pastoral. Virginia Woolf is said to have written a friend: “I read the Book of Job last night—I don’t think God comes well out of it.”² And yet, Job’s response suggests that though he doesn’t get what he asked for, he does seem to get what he really needs.

Sometimes what we think we want is not what we really need. God’s seemingly wild and awesome response is surprising to those brought up with the picture of a gentle and mild old man as God. Still, in all of God’s seemingly harsh words, Job discovers that God has been listening all along. He discovers that God has not been absent. He thought he wanted to bring God into court and argue the merits of his integrity. Instead he found that God already knew everything about him and simply being in God’s presence, simply seeing God with his own eyes and hearing God with his own ears was enough for him. Before, he had only the testimony of others—he had heard others speak of their experience of God. Now he had his own experience and that is more than enough.

Some of you will know the stages of grief made famous by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. She suggested that when a person experiences any great loss, she or he tends to go through these stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. They offer one lens for understanding Job who surely knew about anger, about bargaining, about depression. And in the midst of God’s long diatribe,

he also seems to learn acceptance. He discovers, in the words of Gary Kowalski, that “the faith we live by and that sustains us through the sad times and the glad times and the mad times is not based on rational demonstration, but on inner conviction. The power behind life is not ultimately logical or orderly or just. It is wild and untamed and full of rough edges. It rages as well as gently flows. It thunders and floods as well as softly rains. When our world falls apart, that is not a logical process, nor is it logical when it comes back together again. The redeeming fact is, however, that it can come back together. The darkness that seemed like it would never end gives way to light. Despair melts and hope is born. How this happens is a mystery...inexplicable...an act of grace.”³

The witness of this book of Job declares that we don’t know why people suffer. We don’t get answers. We are not God and God is much more than we can imagine. It declares that it is absolutely appropriate to be demanding of God, to be angry with God, to demand justice from God. Job also is honest. Many times in our lives it will seem that God isn’t listening, that God is no where to be found. There are times when God simply seems not to answer, and yet, as Barbara Brown Taylor has written, “only an idol always answers. The true God possesses more freedom than that.” She suggests that God’s silence may be “as much a sign of God’s presence as of God’s absence.” Maybe “divine silence is not a vacuum to be filled but a mystery to be entered into, unarmed with words and undistracted by noise—a holy of holies in which we too may be struck dumb by the power of the unsayable God.”⁴ Maybe God speaks so strongly to Job because Job needs finally to be silent that he might he discover God has been with him all along the way.

There is a time for speaking and there is a time for listening, a time for silence. In that silence, we may discover the only answer we really need. In that silence, we may finally hear for ourselves the voice of God.

Let us pray: O God you are beyond our understanding. There is so much that we do not understand. Quiet our hearts and minds that we might discover for ourselves that you are with us, even when we cannot feel your presence. Give us not so much what we want, but so much more what we need. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

¹ James Newsome, *Texts for Preaching, A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV Year B*
© 1993 Westminster/John Knox Press

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God is Silent*. © 1998 Cowley Publications

³ James W. Cox, ed. *Best Sermons 5*. © 1992 Harper Collins Publishers

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God is Silent*. © 1998 Cowley Publications