

Confronting Adversity with Questions

Menno Mennonite Church

October 31, 2021

Purpose: To celebrate our ability to sit with God in questions, even in the midst of adversity.

Message: While the answers are not always easily resolved, we give thanks that God welcomes all of our questions.

Scripture: Job 38:1-7; 34-41

Synopsis: Consciously or not, we all believe in Karma. Perhaps not the notion itself, but the broad concept that would suggest that we get what we deserve is ingrained in our psyche. Because this is what is fair, which, above all, is what we would wish the world to be. Yet fundamentally this is untrue. The harder we work to make it true, the more tightly wound in theological and logical knots we find ourselves.

Sitting with the questions that this reality raises is nothing if not human. These are the foundational notions of life. When Job finally receives his answer (something which is given though not required of God) he receives in turn more questions. These are the rhetorical questions that wonder “are you God?” Far from being the stinging lash of how dare you, God’s response welcomes the questions and proceeds the full redemption of Job to his way. We are given a YHWH God who hears, and in time, speaks in God’s own way to that which matters most to us: the questions of our very being. That, by itself, is a comfort.

Job 38:1–7; 37-41

38 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?

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?

If you have been around children, young children in particular, you know that the phase that is any longer than waiting until you can learn through language what is going on in their minds is the one that directly follows it: waiting for them to learn the discretion or simple boredom with your answers so they can finally stop talking all the time. Especially with the questions. The who, what, why, when and where begin early and arrive often. The number of times when the kids have come to me with those utterly innocuous questions that has a way of knocking your socks off as to how to even begin answering it properly because you forgot that anyone drawing breath could possibly wonder this continues to amaze. Just the other day we were exploring taking the Lord's name in vein and it was a bit of flumux to get there without the crutch of the 10 commandments that they do not yet know. Big or small, there is a question inside it all (there was concern for the mass worm stranding the rain brought with it, complete with rescue effort earlier this week). Few things both warm my heart and try my patience at the very same time as the unending flow of questions. It is enough to drive you just about crazy, and there are times where timeout has to be called before things go seriously wrong.

Yet, even though it is annoying, it makes sense. There is something innate about the human condition that demands a world that makes sense. There is something about the personal psyche that rebels when it does not. The struggle is real in the day to day and the grand and philosophic. We may have abandoned our questions about life, the universe, and everything to the confines of college having better things to get on with doing, but that doesn't mean that the questions have gone; we have just gotten better at deferring them, or at least filtering them to the rare time and place where it might be safe to ask. That is the struggle of Job here; the struggle of questions. Because it doesn't make sense. Calamity doesn't make sense. Hardship follows no predictable pattern. Most of our attempt to impose neat logical explanations to things leads us to a strangled theology based in condemnation and guilt. Few of us would say that we believed in Karma, the credit-debit system of the universe, but that doesn't stop us from wondering if that might be true, and speculating that it might be at work where pain is involved. We want it to make sense; we want it to be fair—that inner 4 year old dies particularly hard—but sometimes, it just doesn't

Through all this study, we have been sitting with Job and his questions. Here, finally, he is given the opportunity that he has long been after, long demanded. He has long since proclaimed that God's responsibility is to respond, and here is the response. But imagine his disappointment when he has his questions answered...with questions. We can imagine the light dying in his eyes, in no small part because, perhaps, we have known that pain too. I am not one to proclaim much about eternity all that often, nor to predict that much about heaven—not out of a lack of embracing their promise or their truth, but more in what I hope to be a healthy dis-inclination to presuppose that I have definitive answers, leaving room for God to handle the details. Yet one thing that I have at times imagined is both the question and answer time at the feet of the master helping all things come to rights. Perhaps that is one of the early stages of heaven—being given the insight that we so notably lack on this side of the equation, and the grace to comprehend it at least by measure.

But here is Job just getting questions back. And not just questions, but those who seem to be aimed at putting Job in his place good and proper. At least we read them as such. I think we project onto the YHWH response the nervousness that we have when we have just about had enough, and the frustrations we carry when we are asked to answer for the impossible. Perhaps we remember the times where we were met with anger at the big questions, dismissing the notion as wrong rather than grace and compassion that we had hoped to find. Yet it is important to note that there is something extraordinary here: God responds. God arrives; God speaks, perhaps not as we might prefer, but speaks all the same. God does not remain aloof and isolated among the heavenly council. God does not remain observing Job as a spectator in it for sport. But God comes and God speaks. And those questions, pointed as they are, are dialog with Job, not, primarily a rebuke, but a reminder. A reminder of the context. A reminder of the order of nature; that nature has an order, whether we elect to always appreciate that order or not. Job had feared that were God to come, God would *“trample me in a storm and multiply my wounds without warrant. He would not let me catch my breath but sate me with bitterness (9,17-18)*. But that is not what happens. There is no threat of death; just the voice of the whirlwind (a preferred form when speaking of the mystery of God (remember Elijah on the mountain and being taken up to heaven). God comes and speaks truth, yes, but truth couched in grace.

This is one of those instances, I think, where what we find in Job and out of Job is much more a function of who we are and how we see the world. We are likely to get back what we

already hold as near and dear about the world and the nature of our lives in it. As a masterpiece of literature that reflects on the human condition. Like all such great works, it does not respond to our world with easy answers or simplistic formulas. It refuses to accept or promote a single, simple interpretation, which, when you get down to it, is a realistic way of reflecting the real world. Real life is always ambiguous despite our efforts to make it not so. There are many ways to interpret what there is here as readers.

Which is not as much of a cop out as it sounds. While the interpretation of the why has to be held somewhat loosely, I think the more informative element for all of this is, in honesty, is contained in what is going on. The what is that God comes and dialogues with Job not to simply put him in his place and tell him to be quiet and toe the line, but to come and be with Job in the questions that were real. Job challenges us to consider faithful and critically the role that we believe God plays in human suffering and in our lives in General. While that is not massively easy to quantify, I do think there is something for us here.

There is a long tradition within Judaism of rhetorical questioning. There is a back and forth and argument to the way of things that our European good order ignores and covers up. We have been given a faith of rules and knowledge where I find there to be ample evidence to show that the Judiac roots of Christian faith have a lot more to do with the nature and dialog of questions, big questions often without specific or easy answers. But there are always conversation, always interaction, always questions. Even the Hebrew idiomatic inclination toward question voicing (think the Yiddish idiomatic “What; I should marry a Tailor?” or some such. In our rush to add a ology—study of—to our knowledge of God to make Theology a science we leave questions behind for knowledge, even if we don’t always know the answers. Perhaps the world as it is remains a bit to complex to go directly for easy answers.

I think we underestimate, at our cost, the benefit of asking questions, and being willing to answer them. There is something holy in simply asking questions, and being willing in the name of Christ to sit with the questions, even if the response is a long silence followed by “I don’t know”. Some of the holy moments for me at camp this summer was working with the “God box”, inviting questions from whomever had them about the church, God, and faith from the Junior thinkers I got to spend the week with. Pinched, in truth, from Gary Jewell, I am a fast convert. Some of the questions I got were profound: If God has Grace, what about Noah? If the church is the body of Christ, why are there so many arguments? Is there things I can do for

which I cannot be forgiven? The stuff that cuts to the quick of the issue. I will not claim good or even serviceable answers, given as they were of the cuff. For me, the answers, though important, were secondary to this: to give kids space at a crucial and often utterly critical point in their lives to simply ask questions, and to demonstrate a faith that can handle questions. Not that there isn't a need to trust and obey—there is. But there is a far greater strength in knowing that God is a God who can accommodate the questions of life. We may not have all the answers, and we may struggle to carry the load as we wait for that day where we will, but we can have and hold the questions. And that is good. That is holy. God does not need our permission to run the world as God does, but God does receive and welcome our input, hold our thoughts, and embraces our questions. God honors us, the created ones, by not offering only silence or platitudes by way of response, but responds with the truth that can be hardest to hear: your thoughts are not my thoughts, nor are my ways your ways. We are encouraged to trust and hope in God, knowing that the answers will come, eventually. Even more, we here see the trust and hope God places in us: allowing us to ask, to struggle, to wonder, to ponder, and to still be embraced by the very love of God. The divine image stamped into our DNA allows us to be heard, known, and embraced.

Like Job our lives are not easy. We find tragedy, collectively and individually, in every shape and size. But ours is not a simplistic yielding to fate, but always takes us from the question of why back to the question of who, connecting us to YHWH God

We can ask the One who answers that which we seek, trusting always that God in love will never leave us or forsake us. In this there is hope, promise, and a future. Amen.