

Speaking of God

Job 42:1-9

Mark 10⁷46-52

“After the Lord had spoken these words to Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite, ‘My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.’”

We come to the end of the Book of Job on Reformation Sunday, a Sunday when I do my best to lift up something distinctive about our Reformed history and theology, something that would be missed were Presbyterians to disappear from the scene. Today the sweep of the Book of Job compels me to wrestle with a doctrine for which Presbyterians are known: the doctrine of the sovereignty of God, which is, in a phrase, the freedom of God to be God. I give you fair warning in the beginning: my encounter with Scripture this week has literally blown my own mind and pushed the words I am about to use to speak of God to the limit.

First a word about the words for God, the names of God employed by the poet who wrote the Book of Job. In the beginning and in the end, God is Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel, the God who saw the suffering of the Israelites and brought them out of slavery, promising them a home, reluctantly giving them a king, sending them into exile when they were unfaithful, and returning them to the land where, even now, God’s people await the coming of the Son of David. But in the middle of Job, both in Job’s complaints and in the counsel of Job’s friends, the words for God are Elohim and Shaddai. These names evoke the majestic and almighty action of God in which God is unknowable, mysterious, completely hidden and therefore menacing, threatening, and malevolent from the perspective of human suffering.

It seems to me that the poet presents three possible responses to the experience of God’s unknowable and menacing mystery. The first is represented by Job’s wife, who counsels him in the face of their unfathomable losses to “Curse God and die.” This is the increasingly favored response of those who have quit God in the face of disease and death or in the headwinds of human failure and depression. You probably know more people than I do who have quit the conversation with God, or with the God they believe God ought to be, when life takes a turn toward darkness. To repeat Brian’s mantra of last Sunday, it is not the way life is supposed to be in the world according to us. If the God we believe God ought to be is not in charge—if another alien God is calling the shots, then I want nothing to do with God. Here Job’s wife said more than she knew, I think, because if God is not with us or for us, even as God appears to be against us, only death and death’s dominion over life remains.

The life that follows is a life lived on the vestiges of the values and ethics once anchored in the biblical narrative, a life plotted and given meaning in the solitariness of the human mind, a life whose destination is the grave. It can be a valiant and courageous life or it can be a shallow life lived shallowly, to borrow the words of Bret Stephens. One response to God’s unknowable and menacing mystery is to curse God and die.

The second response given us by the poet is the response of Job’s friends, the characters with whom ministers are identified, sorry to say. In the face of God’s unknowable and menacing mystery, they cling to what they know *about* God, to the principles and possibilities set forth by what religion has taught them concerning what supposedly can be known about God. For instance: God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. If those words tell the truth about God, then it is left for us to fit the facts of our human existence into that sentence. If God is a principle and not a person, then it is the role of religion to explain why human suffering and tragedy are reasonable and probably the result of human sin if God, on principle, rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked.

What turns out to be the problem with this response to God’s unknowable and menacing mystery is that it collapses the mystery of God into a God bound by the limits of human knowing. Here is where my mind began to be blown. My ministerial mantra when dealing with God’s part in human tragedy and suffering is always to ask, “Is this the God I know in Jesus Christ?” My default for God is my take on who Jesus is. Jesus healed diseases instead of causing them. Jesus took in outcasts instead of punishing them. Jesus assumed our suffering and pain and death as his own rather than inflicting them upon us. Yet I must confess with Job that, even allowing for a “personal relationship with Jesus,” at best I only know *about* God—and more truthfully, I only know about the God I want to know about. Like Job’s friends, I want to absolve God of any complicity in the world’s wildness, in cancer cells permitted to take over the brains of people I love, in hurricanes smashing into Mexican villages with winds over 200 miles per hour, in boats of refugees lost at sea, in children born to live only a few days. Job’s friends know about a God who acted within their reasonable moral framework, leaving them to conclude that Job had missed something of his own culpability. I simply want to absolve both Job and God in the light of Jesus Christ, leaving me with Jeb Bush to say that stuff happens. At the end of the day, I must confess that I mount this pulpit and say a lot *about* the God I want God to be, speaking as one who rarely, really, actually, terrifyingly truly hears this God who speaks from out of the whirlwind. With Job’s friends, in the second place, I try to fit the unknowable and menacing mystery God is into the God I can reasonably believe in.

Job, of course, is the third response the poet offers us to the unknowable and menacing mystery that God is. Where to begin? The poet chose to write a story about a man who was outside the covenant of Yahweh, but who, nevertheless, was a servant of Yahweh. There was none like him in all the earth: pious, sincere, fearing God and hating evil. God stakes God's honor on this man, blessing him in the beginning and in the end. But oh what havoc ensues in between. What ensues is the unknowable and menacing mystery of God's freedom which the human mind cannot contain.

The issue is whether Job fears God for nothing: whether Job will continue to wrestle with God even though there is nothing for Job in this wrestling--and wrestle he does! "Job's complaint," Karl Barth says, "is against a life which only leads to death, which is only a journey into darkness, which is a mere passing and nothing more.... We do not have to be Jobs," Barth says, "to know the transitoriness of life as we lose possessions, family, health, security and honor." But here is where my mind is completely blown. Behind all of the bad things that have happened to Job is Job's one overwhelming grief: the grief of knowing "that in what has happened and what has come on him he has to do with God." On the ash heap his life has become, it is as though his knowledge and so his ignorance of God are "in a headlong collision and an unbearable tension.... He knows that he has to do with God. In this respect he is right. [But if this is so, then he] sees and understands his losses, his sickness, his other adversities, the hopeless transitoriness of his life, to be the will and work of God."

Put another way, because God is having to do with his life in the things that befall him, God has not abandoned him, "but keeps him inescapably in [God's] grasp. *There is no understanding this.* Job sees "his God *and not another* in what overwhelms him. But he does not *understand* [God] in it. He does not recognize his God anymore.... it almost drives him mad that he encounters [God] in a form that is alien to him (not Yahweh but Elohim and Shaddai). Job *suffers* from the very faithfulness which means that God will not abandon him nor he God."

Job's response to God's unknowable and menacing mystery is in direct contrast to the response of Job's wife and even his friends. Along with "the sceptics, pessimists, scoffers and atheists of every age, [they] do not know against whom they [are] direct[ing] their disdain and doubt and scorn and rejection. Job does.... They can easily enter into controversy with a God whom they do not know as their God. Job cannot do this." He will not quit the relationship with this God nor will he return to the God he would like God to be. And neither does Job talk *about* God: he speaks to God and eventually finds himself speaking with the alien God who is crushing him.

When God finally speaks, God speaks not to comfort Job. God's words do not function to explain or reason with his servant. Rather the words spoken out of the whirlwind intensify the otherness, the mystery, the unknowability, the sovereignty, the freedom of God. Job now knows that he cannot know this God who is his God. Therefore Job responds, "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. I have heard of you by the hearing of the ear and now my eye sees you; therefore [according to a Jewish translation] I recant and relent." "Having seen what the whirlwind insisted he see," my colleague Patrick Wilson observes, "Job now recognizes that his laments, his protests, even his hopes were too small. Not wrong, not wicked, but rather inadequate to the human situation."

We are left to wonder, on this Reformation Sunday, how the unknowability and mystery of this God is the same God who has come to us in Jesus Christ. Consider Jesus Christ: the one righteous, obedient and blameless man, a man like no other, whom God willed to suffer and die. When Jesus cries out like Job from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" he is not mistaken. Yet if he is, as the church confesses, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, we behold in "this suffering and dying man, in all his nakedness, abandonment and rejection, with his hopeless complaint and mute accusation," the will and the work of the God who spoke to Job from out of the whirlwind and who, in Jesus Christ, has answered Job's every cry with God's Word made flesh. Therefore, from out of the heart of our every darkness, we nevertheless confess with Job: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see *on my side*, and my eyes shall behold, *and not another.*" In the living presence of him who bore our griefs and carried our sorrows, whom we esteemed smitten of God and afflicted, this preacher can only say, "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.... I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I recant and relent" of my words about you that are too small.