

Last week I met my mother for brunch in Lambertville. On my drive down, on this one road which is a favorite of mine (it's windy, there are horses, old farmhouses, and a distinct lack of other cars), I noticed something ahead in the morning light. A dark anomaly. It could be a rock, I thought, or maybe some debris that fell off a truck. From that distance it was impossible to tell. But as I got closer, as I slowed down, the shape began to take form and I realized it wasn't a rock or any matter or form of debris. No, it was... a turtle! A large, adult turtle. The size of one of those turtles at the zoo. Not one of those little baby ones you see when walking your dog, Vincent, at night. It was really rather incredible. Maybe you had to be there. But as my tires finally came to a stop, and when I got out of the car, it was apparent that this turtle wasn't exactly what I first thought it was. Yes, it was indeed a large turtle, but it was also a large dead turtle.

It had gotten crushed by a car, maybe a SUV. Shell smashed. Underbelly smeared. And seeing it all really got to me. I don't know. Maybe it's silly. I mean, it was a turtle. But I remember thinking just over and again... that's not how things are supposed to be. Squirrels are supposed to be dead in the road. Bugs, splatted against your windshield. An adult turtle the size of a small dog squashed dead on a beautiful back-country road? The indifference. The randomness. That's not how things are supposed to be.

"That's not things are supposed to be" is really, basically, the hash-tag of the story of Job.

- God and Satan (well, not really Satan, but *ha'satan* who was an agent of God – ah, that's for a different sermon) hand-shake in Heaven over a secret wager? Well, that's not how things are supposed to be.
- A blameless man's children die and his livestock perish because of said divine wager? That's not how things are supposed to be.
- This blameless man's friends then *blame* him for the fate that he's suffered, rather than, you know, actually being his friends by consoling him? That's not how things are supposed to be.
- A mysterious guy named Elihu shows up at the end of the story, literally out of nowhere, and says to this blameless man that he is in fact the most-wicked of all sinners, simply because he dared to ask God, 1) where are you, God; and 2) why do I, your blameless servant, deserve such a mean fate? That's not how things are supposed to be.
- And then, finally, God himself appearing after 36-some chapters of silence, only to answer this blameless man saying, yeah I heard you... but you are pathetic, I am great, my voice sounds like thunder. Where were you, when I made everything, you self-righteous faultfinder? God, that's really not how things are supposed to be!

The good news here, if there's any, is that that last bit is slightly misleading. It seems, at least according to certain scholars, that the 38th chapter (our text today) is really God's condemnation against Elihu rather than Job since, 1) Elihu was the last to speak; 2) that Job had ended his defense some 7 chapters earlier; 3) God and Job have an actual back-and-forth conversation two chapters afterward in chapter 40, unlike here in 38 where God is the only one speaking; 4) that Elihu espouses the same rhetoric as Job's friends – that Job must have done something wrong to earn God's wrath -- and as we all remember, God eventually condemns them for being wrong and like the worst friends since ever; 5) God eventually rewards Job for his suffering, acknowledging that Job's defense, and line of divine interrogation, was in fact justified. And yet, nevertheless that randomness... for Job suffered without warrant and with great indifference.

Bad things simply shouldn't happen to good people. Friends should be friends. Turtles should be alive, eating leafy plants somewhere. And God should be a more considerate and present God. God, where are you? This is not how things are supposed to be.

Technology today is both a blessing and a curse, isn't it? On the positive side, we can connect to a whole culture of people expressly different than our own, and we can do so with just a click of a button. We can see inside our bodies with x-rays and ultrasounds. We can celebrate New Year's with friends around the world on FaceTime, and watch live NASA feeds of a robot on Mars. It's incredible. And yet, with so much more information pumping through the airwaves and the inter-webs, we're also fed an excruciating level of detail about all that's wrong in life. School shootings; teen-gang rapes; human-trafficking; crimes against the environment; political and economical corruption; Syria; Ukraine; downed planes; lost freighters; tidal waves and hurricanes. God, where are you? This is not how things are supposed to be.

Honestly, sometimes I wonder what I'm even doing here. How did I ever get on this road? How did I make it out of seminary and into this pulpit? I never had an epiphany, a calling, a divine encounter. Yes, I believed as a young person. And sometimes I think my faith was stronger back then. Or maybe it was simply more ignorant. But even then, in those stronger-younger years, I had my doubts about God's providence. My best friend died in the sixth grade. An uncle was diagnosed with Alzheimer's in his 40's and died in his 50's. My grandfather was a bi-polar depressive, and then he had a stroke and it was instantly over. My parents divorced. I had my knees blow-out not once, not twice, not thrice, but eight times. I had radical reconstructive surgeries. I was told not to swim

certain strokes, not to play some of my favorite sports, and that I would have arthritis in my 40's. Blah blah blah. Cry me a river, right? How many others had it worse, Brian? I certainly had a silver spoon in my mouth anyway, you're right. But still... just where exactly were you, God? Why were you letting any of this happen? I went to youth group. I helped teach Sunday School with my father. I even wore Jesus t-shirts to school... This is not how things were supposed to be.

Flashing-forward: I applied to Seminary sure that my faith would there recover some of its luster. While it was a wonderful three years, some of the best of my life, it didn't exactly help in identifying a direction. Truth be told, my faith weakened so significantly in the first year that I thought about leaving the whole thing. There was just so much information available, and most of what I read completely shattered all of my old notions of God and faith. Where are you, God? This is not how it was supposed to be.

Flashing-forward again... suddenly I am in a dimly lit room. At first it was hard to make sense of. To fathom. There was a woman with an instrument in her hand. She spoke in a thick Russian accent. Anya, I'm sure, was able to parse out her words. But I struggled. Actually, I'm not even sure I heard, or even cared to understand a single word that came from her mouth. For my eyes were suspended in time, transfixed at what I was looking at. For there, right there in front of me, was God. The face of God in black and white. In creation. Somehow, through a complex process I can't even begin to make sense of, a little bit of me was able to comingle with a little bit of Anya, and miraculously, somehow, created this little precious life. With a face. And little fingers. And a spine glowing white. It turned. It moved. It was alive. It was creation. In March 2016, I'm going to be a dad, and Anya will be a mom. And so it was in that room, there and then, that I finally encountered the divine.

Now, having said all that, and in incredible jubilee, what do my words say to all of those poor spouses who remain barren. For those who have looked at an ultrasound and heard it whispered, "hmm...that's not how things are supposed to be." For those who been in our jubilee only to have it snatched from them shortly thereafter. My excitement and Anya's joy certainly does not cover nor excuse the volume of sorrow that occupies itself in clinics all over the world, each and every day.

And yet, I still can't deny what our private experience has reaffirmed for me. That, there is something uniquely divine in creation. And not just in babies being conceived, but in all of this. The cosmos, the earth and the sky, those turtles, everything. But make no mistake, just because God begets creation, doesn't mean that it's always going to be perfect. God is not creation itself. There will be variables. Mutations. Randomness and Indifference. And more often than it ever should be the case, it is us, conspiring with nature, who destroy and pervert creation. Perhaps then, this is why God responds to Elihu, and not Job, in chapter 38 with a diatribe littered in allusions to God's creative acts in nature. That when we mere mortals begin to forget our place, tearing down others with our condemnation, believing ourselves to understand the mysteries of God better than God God's-own-self, we are suddenly reminded of just how awesome God is and how little we are.

Thomas Aquinas argued: that in the initial act of creation God conferred upon nature its own integrity, especially the ability to exercise autonomously the causal powers God has given it. Moreover, nature's autonomy allows for the accidental and the random. Randomness, then, is an essential feature of God's creation.¹ Apparently, that's how things are supposed to be.

Moreover, our text from Mark pits the notion of master and servant against each other, and usurps the usual dominant order of that relationship. So much so that one might say that God, though the original master of creation, is no longer the Lord and ruler over it, but rather a servant to it. He, nor we, can control it fully. Its motion is of its own volition. The unexplained and miraculous will still happen. But so too will loss and heartbreak. And at times it will all seem random and seemingly indifferent. Turtles will die. Stink-bugs will live. Some babies will be born healthy, and others will be born to defect. Some will inherit the lives of kings, while others will be struck down, most unfairly, like Job. And apparently, that's how things are supposed to be.

But none of this is to say that God doesn't care. On the contrary, for God allows us, even validates us to ask why, to seek and to investigate as Job did, and even to get emotional when the answers don't satisfy us. And getting emotional, even angry is okay. Because in truth, God understands. For when God became Man in Jesus, the Divine immediately learned what it felt like to be crushed. To be betrayed. To weep at loss. To pray for cups to pass, and life to change its course. God became human.

As Cindy has told me: "the only clue I have that God does not go around creating pain is who I know God to be in Christ." And that anointed one, Jesus the son of Mary, is forgiveness when all others have condemned; love when all others have faded; hope when our dreams have been whisked away; a ransom which assumes our suffering and even our death.

God in Christ will not, and perhaps cannot, save us from this world's sickness and death. It is beyond the limits of creation. But we are promised that life will go on and there God will be nonetheless. A very present help in our trouble. A close friend in great celebration.

And that, my friends, is how things are supposed to be. Amen.

¹ <http://community.berea.edu/scienceandfaith/essay02.asp>