

The God Who Puts Us in Our Place

Job 38:1-7

Mark 10:35-45

“For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many”

In Robert Frost’s *The Masque of Unreason*, God says to Job:

Too long I’ve owed you this apology  
for the apparently unmeaning sorrow  
you were afflicted with in those old days,  
But it was the essence of the trial  
You shouldn’t understand it at the time.  
It had to seem unmeaning to have meaning  
And it came out all right. I have no doubt  
You realize by now the part you played  
To stultify the Deuteronomist  
And change the tenor of religious thought.

Frost’s reading of Job has always been my own. The Deuteronomist’s voice in Exodus through Second Kings tells of a God who showers blessings on those who keep covenant and curses any who do evil in God’s sight. But even grade school children know better, know on the playground among peers that “Life is not fair.” The innocent suffer. Hence our project as adults is to search for meaning in the suffering that comes upon us from without and through no apparent fault of our own. The search turns out to be more difficult, I think, for those who profess belief in God. “‘Job’s world is etched in the blood of a crime scene,’ Old Testament professor William Brown observes, “*and*, we may add, the fingerprints on the assault weapon belong to God.”

As the Accuser in Archibald MacLeish’s play *J.B.* puts our conundrum: “If God is God, he is not good/If God is good, he is not God/Take the even, take the odd.” That is, if the character who takes the bet with the Accuser and causes Job to suffer *for no reason* is God, then God is not good. If God *is* good, then the character who takes that bet is not God.

Not incidental to our taking the even or taking the odd is that fact that the Book of Job names God in two distinct ways. The God who tests Job in the beginning and the God who restores Job’s fortunes in the end is the God of Israel whose name is Yahweh. This is the God of the second creation story in Genesis, the story of Adam, Eve and the serpent in the garden. Translated in our Bibles as Lord, Yahweh acts in human history as a God of revelation and redemption, a God of compassion and love. The *Lord* is my Shepherd! Yet Jack Miles observes in *God, a Biography*, “The world as created by Yahweh was shot through with a kind of danger; there was indeed a prohibition in it, and when the prohibition was not observed, massive and largely inexplicable punishment followed.”

Elohim is the name of the God in the middle who is the subject of conversation among Job and his friends and who speaks from out of the whirlwind. It is the common name for the God of Israel and yet a name also used for other gods. Translated in our Bibles as just plain “God,” Elohim is a God of creation and power, a transcendent and universal God of impersonal judgment and law. This is the God of the first creation story in Genesis, the God who created the heavens and the earth. The relationship between Elohim and Job is presumed by Job’s friends to be impersonal and legalistic even though, in the beginning the world as created by Elohim was purely good.

Both Gods hover around the crime scene that has become Job’s life. To make sense of it, some take the even, some take the odd. But Israel must take both even and odd because, for Israel, the Lord God is one. The writer of this book must do business with the even God of the wager who is the odd God of the whirlwind.

Taking the odd first, a voice from out of the whirlwind of “withering sarcasm and towering bravado” roars “as an amoral, irresistible force” because the one God is in a bind. God has something to hide—namely the beginning of the story and God’s willingness to inflict suffering on Job for no reason. So God hides in the personae of Elohim, Miles says, “by rising to his full majestic stature, drawing the robes of creation around him...and regally changing the subject.” Job has asked after the reason for his suffering and God has countered with a show of power.

Job’s response, according to most Christian interpreters, is repentance. God has put Job in his place! Yet

listen again, for Job's words are without stage direction. There are no parentheses suggesting the speech be said (*humbly*) or (*defiantly*) or (*sarcastically*) or (*reverently*). If Job takes the odd (if Job insists on believing that God is good) then Job's brief verses can be heard to "bristle with ironic double entendres and with mock-deferential quotations...." "Look, I am of no account. What can I tell you? My hand is on my mouth. I have already spoken once; I will not harp," Miles freely translates. "Why go on? I have nothing to add." This is Job putting God in God's place: If God *is* good, according to Job, the God of the whirlwind is not God!

But if the God of the whirlwind *is* God, then God is not good. Take the even! Precisely, says George Steiner, a professor of comparative literature at Oxford, who argues that God's answer to Job has nothing to do with God's goodness or power or justice or moral character but with the terrible and tender beauty of God's aesthetic. I know this is a stretch, but stay with me for a few minutes. God's answer to Job's immense "Why?" is an apologia--is God's defense, "the most overwhelming that we have, for the doctrine known as 'Art for Art ['s sake]'. . . Like some ultimate Leonardo," Steiner says, "the Deity in Job promenades us through a gallery of masterpieces, of rough sketches, of enigmatically encoded patterns, of grotesques and anatomies. . . . Beyond good and evil, beyond reason and social-ethical accountability rages the drive to create. . . . In the aesthetics of God's non-answering answer to Job. . . 'Creation for Creation ['s sake]' displays its enormity, *its festive impertinence to humanity*" and we are left--if not consoled--then "overwhelmed and mutinous" before "God's choice of the poetic in counterblast to the challenges of. . . the ethical and the religious."

Now Job's eye rather than his ear becomes the organ that receives God's revelation with awe. The effect of God's tour de force is to turn Job from himself and his suffering to the majesty and mystery of the created world. God has indeed put Job in his place by placing his life in the context of the immensity and majesty of God's creation. Barbara Brown Taylor even sees something of Yahweh's redemptive compassion in the reason for 'Elohim's roaring. "By focusing Job's attention on the majesty of the things that ignore him [on creation's festive impertinence to humanity], God offers Job some relief from the egocentricity of his pain. . . . Job is saved by the things that ignore him, shown to him by a God who believes he is worth saving." If you take the even and ignore the odd fact that it is Yahweh who intensified Job's egocentricity by permitting his suffering, then you can say that God *mercifully* puts Job in his place and that place is not at the center of the cosmos.

Fine. "But can the poet still the Job who lives in us?" novelist Cynthia Ozick asks. "God's majesty is eternal, manifest in cell and star. Yet Job's questions toil on, manifest in death camp and hatred, in tyranny and [torture], in bomb and bloodshed. . . . In brutal times, the whirlwind's answer tempts, if not atheism, then the sorrowing conviction of God's indifference."

I mean, did God not know, did Yahweh really think that doubly restoring Job's fortune in the end would redeem Job's suffering or erase God's fingerprints on the assault weapon? Think that blessing him with seven new sons and three new daughters might assuage Job's grief? At this point in the biblical narrative, the character of God does not know and will not know what it is to cry out for meaning in the face of suffering until he should hear his own son's forsaken cry on the cross. Indeed, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from his prison cell, "only a suffering God can help."

So for the third time in Mark Jesus says to the disciples, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes and they will condemn him to death; and then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; and they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again." "Until Yahweh met death, his identity remained ambiguous," Robert Jenson wrote, "and Israel was therefore permanently tempted to confuse him with the nations' gods. . . ." Take the even; take the odd. But "if [God] is love, and therefore [God] finds himself in what God gives us," it is in giving us his son, his only son, his beloved, that God's love turns our suffering selves not toward the festive impertinence of the cosmos but toward the cross where God takes our place of suffering and death as his own.

In Jesus, God takes Job's place, the place of the godless and the godforsaken even as, in following Jesus, we literally find our identity as we put ourselves in the place of those who suffer. For the third time Jesus says to his disciples, who three times have denied the necessity of their own suffering, "whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." In Christ, the God who puts us in our place, puts us in the place of the last, the slave, the despised, the rejected, the place no longer God forsaken because that is the place where the suffering God reigns. Thanks be to God!