

## Season after Pentecost - Job (Week 4)

July 23 & 24, 2016

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: John 6: 16-20; Job 31: 35-37;38: 1-11

*Let this written and spoken word lead us to the living, Word, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Job and his friends have been arguing for chapters about the nature of God and the cause for suffering. All of them are operating from the widely-held view of God as an automaton, a cosmic vending machine, dispensing rewards to the righteous and punishment to the wicked. Job contends this system of dispersement has broken down and God is not doing God's job. His friends argue God hasn't failed but that Job has erred<sup>1</sup> and won't repent. Job asserts he has done nothing to deserve the extreme misfortunes that have befallen him. He rails against God as a "tyrant or sadist, mismanaging a chaotic universe."<sup>2</sup> He ends his speeches maintaining he has lived righteously and his suffering is an utter injustice. "He boasts that if he had a written indictment by God, who he now calls his adversary, he would wear it like a crown and approach the Almighty like a prince. Then, for a time at least, 'The words of Job are ended.'"<sup>3</sup>

After yet another friend of Job, Elihu, makes a few more speeches, "God shows up"<sup>4</sup> "The LORD doesn't evaluate Job's case against God, but questions Job's knowledge of the mysteries of the universe and the ways of God."<sup>5</sup> The LORD tells Job to brace himself because it's his turn to be questioned. "[Then] God takes Job on a whirlwind tour of the cosmos, displaying creation in all its wildness and beauty."<sup>6</sup> While the LORD will not scold Job for all his doubts, tirades and questions, it doesn't seem God will give him the straightforward answers he was hoping for. What is it that we and Job are to learn from God's tour of creation? There's a folk tale that may help.

Once there was an old man who lived in a tiny village. Although poor, he was envied by all, for he owned a beautiful white horse. Even the king coveted his treasure. A horse like this had never been seen before - such was its splendor, its majesty, its strength. People offered fabulous prices for the steed, but the old man always refused. "This horse is not a horse to me," he would tell them. "It is a person. How could you sell a person? He is a friend, not a possession. How could you sell a friend?" The man was poor and the temptation was great. But he never sold the horse.

One morning he found that the horse was not in the stable. All the village came to see him. "You old fool," they scoffed, "we told you that someone would steal your horse.

*We warned you that you would be robbed. You are so poor. How could you ever hope to protect such a valuable animal? It would have been better to have sold him. You could have asked whatever price you wanted. Now the horse is gone, and you've been cursed with misfortune.*" The old man responded, *"Don't speak too quickly. Say only that the horse is not in the stable. That is all we know; the rest is judgment. If I've been cursed or not, how can you know? How can you judge?"* The people contested, *"Don't make us out to be fools! We may not be philosophers, but great philosophy is not needed. The simple fact that your horse is gone is a curse."* The old man spoke again. *"All I know is that the stable is empty, and the horse is gone. The rest I don't know. Whether it is a curse or a blessing, I can't say. All we can see is a fragment. Who can say what will come next?"* The people of the village laughed. They thought that the man was mad. They had always thought he was fool; if he wasn't, he had sold the horse and lived off the money. But instead, he was a poor woodcutter, an old man still cutting firewood and dragging it out of the forest and selling it. He lived hand to mouth in the misery of poverty. Now he had proven that he was, indeed, a fool

After fifteen days, the horse returned. He hadn't been stolen; he had run away into the forest. Not only had he returned but he had brought a dozen wild horses with him. Once again the village people gathered around the woodcutter and spoke. *"Old man, you were right and we were wrong. What we thought was a curse was a blessing. Please forgive us."* The man responded, *"Once again, you go too far. Say only that the horse is back. State only that a dozen horses returned with him, but don't judge. How do you know if this is a blessing or not? You see only a fragment. Unless you know the whole story, how can you judge? You read only one page of a book. Can you judge the whole book? You read only one word of a phrase. Can you understand the entire phrase? Life is so vast, yet you judge all of life with one page or one word. All you have is a fragment! Don't say that this is a blessing. No one knows. I am content with what I know. I am not perturbed by what I don't."*

*Maybe the old man is right,"* they said to one another. So they said little. But down deep, they knew he was wrong. They knew it was a blessing. Twelve wild horses had returned with one horse. With a little bit of work, the animals could be broken and trained and sold for much money.

The old man had a son, an only son. The young man began to break the wild horses. After a few days, he fell from one of the horses and broke both legs. Once again the villagers gathered around the old man and cast their judgments. *"You were right,"* they said. *"You proved you were right. The dozen horses were not a blessing. They were a curse. Your only son has broken his legs, and now in your old age you have no one to help you. Now you are poorer than ever."* The old man spoke again. *"You people are obsessed with judging. Don't go so far. Say only that my son broke his legs. Who knows if it is a blessing or a curse? No one knows. We only have a fragment. Life comes in fragments."*

Now it so happened that a few weeks later the country engaged in war against a neighboring country. All the young men of the village were required to join the army. Only the son of the old man was excluded, because he was injured. Once again the people gathered around the old man, crying and screaming because their sons had been taken. There was little chance that they would return. The enemy was strong, and the war would be a losing struggle. They would never see their sons again. *"You were right, old man,"* they wept. *"God knows you were right. This proves it. Your son's accident was a blessing. His legs may be broken, but at least he is with you. Our sons are gone forever."* The old man spoke again. *"It is impossible to talk with you. You always draw conclusions. No one knows. Say only this: Your sons have to go to war, and mine did not. No one knows if it is a blessing or a curse. No one is wise enough to know. We only have fragments."<sup>7</sup>*

We only have fragments. We do not have minds or imaginations that can begin to comprehend the whole of time, creation, ourselves, others, our Lord. Job, his friends and we want things to be "sensible, well-adapted to human purposes, and above all predictable . . . Job is convinced that his moral innocence should have warded off disaster, because he believes that the world is a manageable place run by a demanding but nonetheless predictable God who owes the righteous a good time."<sup>8</sup> Job is only beginning to find out that his conclusions about the workings of the world and the ways of God were based on mere fragments, utterly inadequate for such judgments. Job is about to learn that "the universe is far bigger, far stranger, and far more mysterious than we can imagine"<sup>9</sup> . . . and it is not ours but God's. Following the Lord into the vastness of the world's wonders and the intricacies of creation, we encounter a different question

than we first asked. Beyond a fragmentary explanation of suffering, terrorism, senseless shootings, fears of differences is the deeper query that we must answer for ourselves — Will we trust our Lord whom we cannot control? No matter the circumstances, will we trust the Lord who creates and loves with utter generosity, in ways we cannot fully grasp? That is faith — and even when it is only a fragment, only the size of a mustard seed, such faith in the goodness of God will uphold and carry us.

Linda M Alessandri 7/23/16

## ENDNOTES

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1. Karla Suomala, "Commentary on Job 38: 1-7 [34-41]" as [posted on [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)].
  2. John C. Holbert, "Commentary on Job 38: 1-11" as posted on [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)
  3. Walter C. Bouzard, "Commentary on Job 38: 1-11 as posted on [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)
  4. Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, "Job: Notes for a Six-week Preaching Series on Job" as posted on [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)
  5. Paraphrase of a sentence of Walter C. Bouzard, from his "Commentary on Job 38: 1-11 as posted on [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)
  6. Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, "Job: Notes for a Six-week Preaching Series on Job" as posted on [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)
  7. A folk tale as recounted by Melvin Tinker in the first of a series of sermons on Job (2006) as posted on <http://www.bethinking.org/suffering/sermons-on-job>
  8. Ellen F. Davis, "The Sufferer's Wisdom: The Book of Job" in her book, Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament Lanham MD: Cowley Publication Books, 2001 p. 137
  9. John C. Holbert, "Commentary on Job 38: 1-11" as posted on [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)