

Out of the Whirlwind

OT Reading: Job 38:1-7; 31-41

Gospel: Luke 3:4-6

When I was a young geology student, sometime back in the neolithic, I spent a few years doing field work in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland. I soon became accustomed to the sometimes violent extremes of weather there. One day would bring bright skies and soft sea breezes. The next could find me battling howling winds and blinding torrents of rain. It's a wild and beautiful place, with rugged mountains, steep valleys and ever changing coastlines.

"Every valley shall be filled, and every and hill shall be brought low; the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God". I love those words of Isaiah because they speak to me of the natural processes taking place on this planet over millions of years. The earth is a violent place, constantly shaping and changing, with tectonic plates coming together to create mountain chains, erosion of those same mountains, to fill the valleys, and the smoothing out of plains by wind, water and ice.

Whether you believe the earth was formed in six days or four billion years, it remains an awesome place. And whether watching a meteor shower in the night sky, or looking at massive colliding galaxies as recorded by the Webb telescope, we can only wonder at the overwhelming power of the God's creation. Volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and tsunamis on our small planet are minor disturbances when compared to a black holes and supernova explosions, just as we are bit players in God's universe.

This is God's message to Job who, after a series of disasters had befallen him and his family, cries out in anguish and anger, pleading his innocence and demanding that God show his face and answer his questions. When God finally speaks, or rather thunders, it is with a whirlwind blast which blows away all of Job's complaints: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge"? Then, rather than answer Job's questions he leads Job on a tour through the cosmos, stretching all the way from ostriches to Orion.

And it's a wild ride. "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth"? God booms. And off he goes, beginning with creation itself: "Who laid the cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy"? He goes on for four chapters, and it's the most glorious and electrifying speech that God makes in the whole Old Testament, and asks the most preposterous and unanswerable questions that have ever been asked by God or anybody else:

“Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, so that a flood of waters may cover you? Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go and say to you, ‘Here we are?’” And then he soars into a breathtaking aria about the Behemoth whose bones are tubes of bronze, and the Leviathan whose mouth pours out flaming torches; and he challenges Job, or anyone else for that matter to pierce their skins with harpoons or take them for walks on a lead.

The Old Testament scholar Walter Bruggemann has said that God is unpredictable and untameable, acting in ways that are wild and free and beautiful. He is not an orderly home-maker, who clears up human grievances or sweeps away human fear, but a chaotic holy divinity that refuses to be controlled by our demands or questions or even our suffering. In asking Job, “Who are you to be questioning me?” he demonstrates that he is on a completely different meteorological, cosmological, celestial, and terrestrial plane.

In fact, God does not seem particularly concerned about Job or his kind at all. Nowhere in his answer to Job is there any mention of humanity, let alone humanity’s dominion. Instead God celebrates earth’s untamed creatures – lions, mountain goats, deer, wild donkeys and oxen, ostriches and eagles as well as primordial monsters. This is not a world in which we are the lords and masters. It is a vast and alien array of life in all its variety, full of fierce strength, freedom, and wild beauty.

When God finally stops to catch his breath, there is little for Job to say, except, “I know that you can do all things ... I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me which I did not know ... I have heard you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes”.

After all this, you may think of God as a great cosmic bully, or you can think of him as a great cosmic artist, splashing a string of constellations here and a wave of comets there, throwing rings of ice around Saturn and raining diamonds on Neptune; or a singer of such power and magnificence that he hardly notices the open mouths and ruptured eardrums and of his audience. However you may look at it, he is the Lord and creator of all, whose glory, wisdom and power far exceed anything the human mind can grasp.

Untameable, immeasurable, but relatable. God didn’t have to respond to Job’s complaint; he could have retained a distant silence. But “The Lord answered Job ...”. God spoke out of the whirlwind. God didn’t give Job a typical answer. He didn’t try to explain Job’s sufferings; he didn’t even contradict his accusations. Instead he presented a breathtaking voyage through his creation, from vast springs of the seas to morning stars to storehouses of snow to torrents of rain; to

horses' manes, soaring hawks and mounting eagles – a glorious hymn sung in the face of great suffering, a picture of beauty on the canvass of pain, bringing hope, wonder and awe.

A journalist tells of interviewing a geologist at the height of a massive hurricane that was slamming into the North Atlantic coast. The geologist specialised in the study of beaches and said that he couldn't wait to get to the beach. The journalist asked what he expected to find there. "Oh", said the geologist, "there will probably be a new beach".

A new beach, a new coastline, new hope, new creation, out of the whirlwind of a storm.

Amen

Martha Taft Golden
St. Mary's, Holmbury
and St. John's, Wotton
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