

Job 38:1-11

Pentecost 3 (Midweek) • Proper 7 • June 24, 2009

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church • Boise, Idaho

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“Hidden and Revealed”

Here’s the story behind our Old Testament reading: once upon a time, Job was a prosperous man. God had blessed him with all sorts of prosperity—including flocks and herds, wealth and family. Then, in His wisdom, the Lord permitted all of that to be taken away. Sitting on the ash heap that was once his home, Job faithfully proclaimed, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21).

His friends came to, um, “comfort” him, but their words were far from comforting. Their speech had a common theme: time and time again, they asserted that Job’s losses of goods, family and health had a specific cause. Clearly, they said, Job had done something—committed some terrible sin—that would cause the Lord to punish him so. That was their unceasing argument, tireless and tiresome; and really, it is the same theology of the televangelists today. We call it a “theology of glory:” if you’re prosperous, then God must love you. If you’re afflicted, then you must have done something wrong for God to treat you so.

Job responded to his friends time and time again, steadfastly denying that he had committed some grave transgression that had especially offended God. In this, he was correct. However, Job was not without sin. Worn down by suffering—as well as the terrible counsel of his friends, by his last discourse he was pitching God as unfair and himself as the innocent victim. While he didn’t believe that he had done something especially wrong to merit God’s punishment, he did believe that he deserved better for his piety and faithfulness. He was starting to accuse the Lord of slipping up in His treatment of him.

The Lord answered, and our text covers the first few verses of His answer. He puts forth question after question to Job. But before we take a look at what the Lord has to say, let’s take a moment and make this clear: the temptations that Job faced are the same ones that the devil throws at you, too. If not now, then eventually you will be tempted to accuse God of being unfair. You may follow the theology of Job’s friends and believe that afflictions are proof of God’s anger at you, while prosperity is proof of God’s love. If you do not apply this to yourself, you will be tempted to apply it to the afflictions and prosperity of others. But this temptation denies the Gospel. No matter what your eyes see, and whether you experience affliction or prosperity, you already know exactly God’s attitude toward you: for the sake of Jesus Christ, He declares you to be His beloved child—forgiven, holy, bound for heaven.

If you avoid the trap of the three friends, you still have the temptation to which Job finally succumbed. Worn down, you’ll be tempted to believe that you don’t deserve the grief that you have, that God is being unfair or unthinking in His treatment of you. This also denies the Gospel: in Christ, God promises that He has made you His own, that He knows you so well as to number the hairs on your head. To accuse Him of being unfair or neglectful is to say that Christ hasn’t really made you His beloved child.

And make no mistake, affliction will come. As much as we want to pretend that we’ll be able to face it boldly, suffering can grind you down to a fine dust until you’ve got no fight left. Everyone has

limits—everyone can take only so much. That is where Job was at the end of chapter 37; but rather than say, “Because I’ve reached my limit, I must all the more trust in God,” Job started to declare God unfair in his treatment instead.

So God spoke to correct Job of his sinful accusations. And because you and I face the same temptations, we do well to consider His words, for He speaks them to us, too:

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy? Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb, when I made clouds its garment and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed limits for it and set bars and doors, and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed?’ (Job 38:4-11)

Where were you? asks God. Where were you when God created the earth, set the land and placed limits on the sea? Where were you? Did you witness it? Beyond the fact that He spoke, do you know how all this came to be, how He spoke it out step by step? Do you? No. Neither do I. We weren’t there, and it is too much for us to understand.

Now, to be clear, in these questions from our text, the Lord speaks only of things that He did during the first three days of creation—and all of this is beyond our ken. Let’s say that the world is 15,000 years old. That leaves around 5.5 million days *not* covered in our Old Testament lesson: and on each of those days, the Lord has been at work. Creation was not a one-time thing: God continues to create and preserve as time goes along. He makes the world keep turning and the sun burning. He sends rain and makes crops grow. Furthermore, He directs the events of the lives of all—some six billion people a day, providing them with clothing and shoes, meat and drink, spouse and family, house and home, fields, cattle and all their goods. He even watches over the sparrows and lilies.

You and I don’t quite have that frame of reference: we lack the capacity to know what the person next to us is thinking, much less what is going through the mind of God. So...do you really want to claim you know what God is up to? Do you really want to say that you understand His will, His work, His reasons for everything He does? It is no wonder that the Lord begins His words to Job by saying, “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” When Job questioned God’s will, his words were without knowledge: in other words, he really didn’t know what he was talking about.

When you and I question the Lord’s will—when we seek answers that He hasn’t given to us or explanations He hasn’t promised to provide, we utter words without knowledge, too. We don’t know what we’re talking about. And although you and I can certainly understand how we would be driven to doubt—and while you and I can sympathize those who ask the question, there’s a big sin at work here: idolatry. When you question God’s will, you’re saying that you know better, that your will is better. You’re trusting yourself more than the Lord. You’re making yourself a god.

That is why the Lord speaks to admonish Job in our reading. God is not insecure and trying to keep Job under His thumb, putting him in his place. No, the Lord warns Job against his “words without knowledge” because those words without knowledge will lead Job away from the Lord and His grace. That is why we also warn you against those words without knowledge: speculation of what you do not know will lead you astray from the Lord and His grace. That is not what the Lord wants for you.

That is why you and I repent when we doubt God's plan, question His will, and indulge in fruitless speculation as to what He's up to. And having repented of that sin, we acknowledge a couple of important truths.

The first is this: God keeps secrets. He doesn't tell you everything. You and I, with our sinful, finite minds, don't have the capacity to grasp it all, anyway. To demand answers is not a right that God gives. But He does give you the promise that He works all things for your good. He does give you the promise that He will not leave you nor forsake you. And in Deuteronomy 29:29, He says this: "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law." God keeps secrets. He says so: in the words of Job, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away: blessed be the name of the Lord." But the Lord doesn't keep everything a secret: He also reveals things so that we might have them forever.

What might this be? Here is the second truth we acknowledge: God reveals what you most need to know. He reveals to you salvation through His Son, Jesus Christ. He declares His Law to you, in order to prepare you for that Gospel; and in that Law, He declares the stark truth about our sin—we're born dead in it, enemies of God. When trouble befalls us, it does not mean that we have committed some sin that suddenly deserves His judgment; rather, we are always sinful. As we confess in the Small Catechism, "We daily sin much and deserve nothing but punishment." The Law preaches that, for the same reason, we shouldn't expect prosperity for our attempts to be faithful—"for we deserve none of the things for which we ask." In other words: no matter the trouble we have in life, it is less than we deserve for our sin, because we truly ought to be God-forsaken since we deserve none of His help at all. That's a difficult truth for our pride, which shouts "That's not fair!" Fair or not, it's the truth about us according to the Law of the Lord.

But God doesn't stop once His Law is revealed. He also reveals His Gospel to you. He tells you that Christ has died for all of your sins. He tells you that, for Jesus' sake, you're His beloved child. For Jesus' sake, God promises to work all things for your good. For Jesus' sake, He will deliver you from every evil of body and soul, property and honor; and finally, when your last hour has come, He will grant you a blessed end, and take you from this vale of tears to Himself in heaven.

That is the truth that God reveals: that is the Gospel He speaks to you, and by it He gives you the faith to hold onto it. Thus, whatever your troubles, He bids you to cling to the cross. You cannot know the reason for all of the troubles that afflict you—but you do know the Savior who delivers you. One might equate it to a man floating in the ocean with a flotation ring. Every wave has the possibility of sending him under: but rather than contemplate every wave, he clings to the ring that keeps him afloat. That is what we do as Christians: rather than question what we don't know about God's will, we cling to what we do know: Christ has died for our sins. He is risen again. He reigns at God's right hand for your good, and He will deliver you.

In every trouble, by faith you cling to Christ. That's why your Baptism is important: it's an objective thing that happened at a specific place and time: in the midst of trouble, you say, "I know that the Lord has made me His, that Christ is mine and I am Christ's. God has revealed this to me in His Word, and I trust in Him." It's why, in the midst of trouble, you come to hear the absolution: for as you hear the Lord say, "I forgive you all of your sins," you have His promise that He has not forsaken you, but will deliver you. Likewise, you go to the Supper to be forgiven your sins and strengthened in faith: because

while you have no idea what happens next when you depart this place, you know that your Savior is here with you—and thus you depart in peace.

You do this by faith—by the faith that God gives, because the troubles that you see always appear greater than the help and presence of God. Look at our Gospel lesson, with the disciples trapped in a boat in a great storm. The Lord was present with them in the boat, but instead the disciples stared at the waves and were terrified by the threat that they held. Likewise, you'll be tempted to fear trouble and doubt God's care for you.

What to do? Once the Lord spoke to Job, Job finally responded, "*I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know...I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes*" (Job 42:3-6). Thus you also live a life of repentance and faith. The Lord forgave Job. The Lord forgives you—all for Jesus' sake.

That is what He most gives you to know—that you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen