

“Words Without Knowledge”

sermon digest

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Job 38:1-14

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If your roots are in the Reformed tradition, you are probably familiar with the first lesson from the Westminster Shorter Catechism, one of the most quoted lines in Christian literature: “Q. What is the chief end of man? A. Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” The Q & A structure of the catechetical approach to Christian education commits to memory the basic questions and answers about matters of faith. Historic catechisms attempted to gather the best wisdom of the church through the ages, but the message was often lost in the sounds of classroom chants. Catechism, like memorized multiplication tables, serves a valid need for beginners, but eventually life raises bigger questions than the ones committed to memory. We eventually reach a point where we hit the ceiling, and the answers cease to address the real questions.

The story of Job is about a community of faith that had shaken down their religion to a series of simple answers to ultimate questions. Follow the counsel of Job’s friends, and you will begin to grasp the catechism of conventional wisdom: Q. What is the meaning of human suffering? A. God punishes evil and rewards good. Q. Do bad things happen to good people? A. Human suffering is evidence of human error. Q. Does God care about human suffering? A. God cares for the people who humble themselves, repent of their sins, and pray. God rewards submission and punishes defiance.

The mystery of God is shrouded in questions for which there are no answers. Job knows and at one time accepted the simple answers as the way of God, but his faith would not, could not, stop at the boundaries of tradition. Job reminds me of the introduction to the old “Star Trek” television shows; he goes where no one has dared to go before. However, his exploration of the outer space of religion is driven by necessity, not a casual curiosity. The story of Job is not the work of armchair philosophy or scientific interest. From the ashes of devastating loss, Job demands justice from the God of creation.

Finally, “The LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind.” Epiphanies were commonly associated with powerful demonstrations of nature in storms or great winds. A variety of words for deity are employed in the speeches of Job and the friends, but the Jewish God YHWH appears only in the prologue and the concluding epiphany, at the beginning and the end, suggesting that the story speaks to the inner-nature of God only at the beginning and end. Like other Jewish epiphanies—the covenant with Abraham, Jacob’s wrestling with an angel, Moses at the burning bush—Job finally has an audience with God, but don’t sigh in relief quite yet. One cannot escape a connection to the “great wind” that took the lives of Job’s seven sons and three daughters in the prologue—the LORD who gives and takes away. After a new catechism seems to be on the verge of divine revelation, the three-chapter address from God appears as a series of rhetorical questions in the form of accusations leveled at Job. The “answer” turns out to be both less and more than an “answer.” Just when it seems that vindication is at hand and that God is about to explain to Job’s satisfaction the meaning of his suffering, the “answer” does not answer. The reply of God to the Job event moves into the mystery of ultimate questions left to stand in the face of human demand. Instead of a neat package, a new catechism in response to the challenges of Job screamed toward the heavens, the story moves into the mist of divine transcendence. God offer no explanation, no apology, not even compassion for Job’s tragedy. The LORD (YHWH) comes across as the transcendent Other, the god of absolute authority and complete mystery.

Job is satisfied with a divine encounter without answers. Job responds appropriately with self-deprecation. He grovels: “therefore, I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” (42:6) Elie Wiesel is disappointed in Job’s response to the divine inquisition: “The fierce rebel, the fighter who dared to face God and speak up as a free man, abruptly bowed his head and gave in. No sooner had God finished His sermon than Job pulled back and withdrew his questions, canceled his complaints.” (*Messengers of God*, p. 231) If we think that Wiesel is too bitter and demanding of God, it is a sure sign that none of us lived through Auschwitz. Wiesel wants the freedom fighter to stay the course and, like Jacob, not to turn loose of God without a blessing, or, in the case of Wiesel, an audit of divine justice.

Agnosticism is a companion to faith. Seminary professor of biblical archaeology Bob Coleman used to tell his students that he could answer any question we dared to ask as long as we are willing to accept “I don’t know” as an answer. In Barbara Brown Taylor’s sermon “On Not Being God” she cites the Franciscan Richard Rohr, the most basic theological problem is that God is God and we are not. She goes on to observe that Job’s problem was not only that Job is not God. “Job accuses God of not being God either.” Taylor hits the nail square on the head. The irreverence in Job addresses the image of god in human understanding. Thus, the first question directed to Job is: “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?”

The word *counsel* is more than instruction or catechism; it addresses the design and structure of the creation. All of the chatter about the Creator revealed more about human ignorance than the real order of things. Even Job’s speculations about God amounted to “words without knowledge.” Does this not fit with most of our language about God? Even the words of the sermon or the eloquent message of theologians do not flow from the core of divine being. They may come from the heart and echo the voice of experience, but they are still words without knowledge.

I have no quarrel with Wiesel’s irritation with Job’s acquiescence to divine authority. Anyone who lives through injustice on

this planet shares his anger. However, the final message of God to Job and Job's final response exposes the problem of human ignorance. We have difficulty in understanding the people with whom we share our lives. How can we ever claim to explain the God who is author of the human mystery?

All that Job had left in the world was a cynical wife and three questionable friends. He did what most of us do. He sat in stunned silence. His three friends approached in reverence, they wept aloud, they tore their clothing and threw dust on their heads. Finally they sat silently on the ground with Job for seven days and nights. Eventually the shock wears off. Then comes the emotional wave, the depression, the panic attacks, the guilt, and the anger. In my early pastoral experience, I thought that I had an obligation to rush in with answers before the questions were raised. When I found myself on the other side of the fence, I realized that the most perceptive theological construction does not fill the deep vacuum in Job's soul. Job broke the silence with a curse on the day that he was born, curses on all of creation, and a barrage of questions and accusations toward God that would have frightened anyone with any thought of the possibility of God. In contrast, Job's friends argued for stock answers and oversimplified explanations, executive summaries of the ways of God. Finally, God speaks out of the mystery of God's being, but God speaks only to the boundaries of what we think we know. In the final analysis, the life of faith is not about knowing; it is about loving. Paul said it best: "if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing." We live by what we believe, by what we think we understand, by our best reach for the image of God that can be put in human words, by our devotion to the one we cannot touch or see, and by our love for the people made in the divine image. Maybe the final message is simply this: *human knowledge cannot and will not ever grasp the fullness of God.*