

The Distance to Hear

Job 38:1-7, 34-41; Mark 10:35-40

CWZepp, BWCOB, October 18, 2015

It is a verse that ought to be prominently displayed in every preacher's study: *"Why do you confuse the issue? Why do you talk without knowing what you are talking about?"*

That's Job chapter 38, verse 2, as rendered by Eugene Peterson in his paraphrase of the Hebrew in *The Message*.

Or as it reads in the NRSV: *"Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?"*

Like a sign warning, "Take heed all ye who enter here," these words are a not-so-subtle reminder that we who dare to speak of God deal in one of the most profound mysteries of the universe. The moment we open our mouths, we have most assuredly failed.

But beginning in chapter 38, Job gets what so few of us who ponder the nature and ways of God ever do – a direct word from the Almighty.

For the bulk of 35 chapters of wisdom poetry preceding this passage, Job and his friends have been debating the nature and justice of God. Having watched his world and everything he cherished fall into ruin, Job has poured out his heart and shaken his fist toward heaven, defending his integrity and questioning the justice and righteousness of any God who would allow such suffering by the innocent. He has challenged the orthodox beliefs of his day as they are voiced by his friends Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. While they have come to comfort him, their pious platitudes have done little to help – if anything their words have strengthened Job's case against God. Defiant to the end, Job holds fast to his claim that his suffering is underserved, challenging the justice and righteousness of God, and demanding a response from the Almighty.

In chapter 38, Job finally gets his wish:

"Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" Gird up your loins like a man. I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

We only got a small taste of what follows in our lectionary reading today. But over the next 4 chapters, God gives Job what-for.

OK, mister know-it-all, tell me this:

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Who determined its measurements? – Surely you must know! Who shut in the seas? Have you commanded the morning since your days began? Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been revealed to you? Where is the way to the dwelling of light? Surely you know! Have you entered the storehouse of the snow? What is the way to the place where the light is distributed, or where is the east wind scattered upon the earth? Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades or loose the cords of Orion? Do you know the

*ordinances of the heavens? Can you establish their rule on the earth? Can you send forth lightnings? Who has put wisdom in the inward parts or given understanding to the mind?*¹ And that is just a few samples from chapter 38. There are still 3 more full chapters where that came from!

It was a whirlwind of rhetorical and sardonic questions for which there are no answers. The barrage comes rolling down upon Job like floodwaters, quickly subsuming him in what Walter Brueggemann has called a “polemical doxology”² – a litany of creation that can do nothing but silence Job, and put him in his place.

After yearning – longing – for God to answer his lengthy complaints, Job is now left practically speechless. We don’t see it in today’s scripture text, but Job in fact does respond to this torrent of divine questions. Twice in fact. First, in 40:4-5, Job responds briefly, *“I am of small account, what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken...but will proceed no further.”* And then after God has at Job again with two more chapters of similar questioning, Job confesses near the end of the book bearing his name, *“I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.”*³

After all is said – and said again – in Job, this seems to be the climax of the story: there is a great distance between God and humanity.

In very different circumstances, James and John, the disciples known as the “sons of thunder”, come to Jesus with an audacious request – “When you come into your glory, let one of us sit on your right and the other at your left.” Jesus’ reply echoes the beginning of God’s response to Job, “You don’t know what you are asking.”

Why do you talk without knowing what you’re talking about? James and John want to be raised to the heights of glory they anticipate for Jesus. Jesus’ response indicates they just don’t understand. There is a great distance between what they imagine Jesus’ glory to be and what truly awaits him.

Now I have to confess that I have a hard time relating to the request of James and John. With my modern, scientific, cosmically informed worldview, I do not ever imagine Jesus destined for a supernatural throne room. I don’t visualize Jesus destined for or now residing upon a heavenly throne, presiding over a cosmic court, or flanked by his most loyal and cherished devotees. There is a great distance between their idea of the divine and my own.

But I do get their cluelessness. Just as I get the cluelessness of Job in understanding the nature and justice of God in the midst of undeserved suffering. I try to understand, but in the end, I just don’t get it.

There is a great distance between God and humanity.

Several years ago I delivered a sermon here in which I showed the now famous “Pale Blue Dot” image which was taken by the Voyager 1 Spacecraft 25 years ago as it was exiting our Solar System. In this photograph, the earth – seen across the expanse of the solar system – appears as a tiny pale blue dot in a sea of empty space, less than a single pixel in diameter.

¹ Selections from Job 38, NRSV

² Quoted by J.S. Randolph Harris in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 4, p. 171.

³ Job 42:3

The photo was taken at the request of astronomer Carl Sagan, who had this to say in reflecting on the image:

From this distant vantage point, the Earth might not seem of any particular interest. But for us, it's different. Consider again that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader," every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there – on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that in glory and triumph they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner. How frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds. Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. ... It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world.⁴

I imagine that the perspective afforded by this photograph is similar to that given to Job by God's torrent of questions beginning in chapter 38. It forced Job to acknowledge his place as a tiny, insignificant speck of dust when seen from God's vantage point.

It forced the recognition that there is a great distance between God and humanity.

But that isn't necessarily a bad thing.

Dazzling pictures and data from the Hubble Space Telescope continue to bear witness to the unfathomable vastness of the cosmos. Multiple *galaxies* can be seen in some images, each made up of billions of stars. In light of such amazing and overwhelming realities, it is possible for us to feel very small – very distant from God.

In Psalm 8, the Psalmist declares, *"When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?"⁵*

"Who are we?" we wonder with the psalmist, "that God would take notice of us," given the near-infinite scope of creation?

And yet...

From the midst of a whirlwind, the voice of the Lord comes *addressed to one of us!* God speaks *about* the immensity of creation, but God speaks *to* Job.⁶

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pale_Blue_Dot#Reflections_by_Sagan

⁵ Psalm 8:3-4, NRSV

For all of our seeming inconsequence, we are the ones to whom God has spoken, the ones to whom God holds out the promise of contemplation about the design of creation, the nature of God, and the mysteries of life.

Albert Einstein, who understood more of the mysteries of the universe than most of us will ever hope to comprehend, said, "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed."⁷ I would humbly add that the mysterious is also the source of all true faith.

Fans of 90s rock music will likely recognize the lyrics heading our bulletin this morning, taken from the title track of the 1999 album *The Distance to Here* by the band Live. They came to my mind as I was reading these lectionary scriptures in preparation for worship today, and continued to echo as I studied these passages...

The distance... is not doable in these bodies of clay.
The distance... makes me uncomfortable.
The distance... guess it's natural to feel this way.

Perhaps so.

But perhaps it is that distance, that impossibility of comprehension, that absolute sense of insignificance and vulnerability, that demands we stand in wonder and awe before the Great Mystery.

And perhaps it is one of the only things that can get us to stop talking when we don't really know what we are talking about.

For it may be that silence is the only adequate response when overcome with awe and wonder, when confronted with a mystery as deep and profound as the divine.

But in silence, the one who is beating our hearts may find an opening for a still small voice. Because the distance may not be doable for us. But for God, well...

⁶ Insight and phrasing - J.S. Randolph Harris, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 4, p. 175.

⁷ <http://www.sermoncentral.com/illustrations/sermon-illustration-richard-francis-quotes-worshipdefinition-27549.asp>