

“Can You Guide the Stars?
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning Job 38:1-41
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
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For thirty-seven long chapters Job and his friends go back and forth—Job grieving his horrifying losses, declaring his innocence, and questioning God’s justice while his “friends” rebuke him and share their long-winded opinions. And for all this time, God is silent. As Job says, “I go east; God’s not there. West, and don’t discover him; north in his activity and I don’t grasp him; he turns south and I don’t see.”

God is painfully, deafeningly absent.

Until now. In Job 38, God finally speaks. Perhaps you can relate. Have you ever waited thirty-seven chapters of your life for God to respond? For some of us, God’s silences are long and drawn out indeed.

But thanks be to God, there are more than thirty-seven chapters to Job’s story—and, I reckon, there is a chapter thirty-eight for you too. There is a time a comin’ when God will break the silence and you will hear.

God’s answer to Job reminds me of a storybook version of the Psalms that I read to my baby girl. Psalm 8 says this: “People are so small next to you, God. You put the stars and the moon in the sky, and the birds in the air above the cows and horses in the fields, and the fish that swim in the seas. You created all the beauty in the world!”

God answers Job’s questions with a series of more questions. Questions like: “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations? In your lifetime have you commanded the morning, informed the dawn of its place? Have you gone to the sea’s sources, walked in the chamber of the deep? Have you surveyed earth’s expanses? Where is darkness located? From whose belly does ice come; who gave birth to heaven’s frost? Can you guide the stars? Can you issue an order to the clouds? Can you send lightning? Who gave understanding to a rooster?”

I love that last one. Who taught the rooster to crow just before daybreak? Have you ever thought about that? *How does* the rooster know? According to the Smithsonian, roosters have an internal rhythm that keeps them crowing on schedule even when the lights are turned off. Also, that verse in Job allowed me to put a painting of a rooster on the front of your worship guide and count it relevant, which doesn’t happen just any ole’ Sunday. I thought that was kinda fun.

In other words, God says to Job, “Job, my friend, there is so much you do not know, so much you do not understand and never will, so much over which you have no power or control. I am God and you are not.”

It would be a mistake to think that God is mocking Job or aggressively putting him in his place. Job has audaciously questioned God's own justice and God honors Job's protest with God's own presence and a response. Note that God does not contest Job's innocence. God does not argue against Job's integrity, which has been Job's main point all along. However, neither does God admit God's own injustice, which has been Job's main contention. Thus in many ways, God's answer is a non-answer. God answers the accusations about God's justice with a declaration of God's might, which bypasses rather than addresses Job's most pressing question.

It is useful here to remember what I explained last week about Wisdom Literature, how Job functions as a challenge to the conventional wisdom of Proverbs. Whereas Proverbs asserts that the righteous will receive God's blessing and the wicked will receive misery, the book of Job says, "Nope, life doesn't actually work that way. Somehow in the midst of all this, God is still God, but that's about all the explanation you answer-hungry mortals are going to get." This challenge to the conventional wisdom isn't intended to be cruel. It is intended to be real-to-life, because there is no fully satisfying answer to the question of theodicy. The most popular question we humans ask God when we suffer is WHY? and the most consistent response we get is silence. There is no answer to why. At best all we hear from God is, "I'm still here. I know it makes no sense based on your experience, but I really do love you."

The book of Job represents a common experience of people of faith which is the loss of our theological innocence and moral simplicity. The meanings to which we once fervently clung fold before our eyes. Like trying to put a shattered egg back together, there is no honest way to succeed and the harder you try, the messier it becomes and the more hopeless you feel.

Many people simply refuse ever to advance to this stage of faith because the void of solid answers is understandably just too terrifying. They stay firmly planted in the reliable, predictable wisdom of Proverbs with its predictable, controllable God, because this is where they feel safe. But in order to live here forever one must perfect the art of denial—either by somehow escaping suffering themselves and dismissing the suffering of others or explaining suffering away in ways that do not make sense to honest and sensible people.

The book of Job is for the advanced person of faith who has left the comfort of traditional answers behind and yet is willing to go toe-to-toe with God anyway. This one is determined to hold on to the truth of their experience even when it contradicts the truth of Proverbs. This person of faith can never again return to the comfortable simplicity that held them so securely in the past. This person of faith will not find answers that ultimately satisfy their burning questions or resolve all their tension. This person of faith has abandoned certainties and cannot ever have them back. Thus this person of faith has finally earned their right to the title they so arrogantly claimed before—"person of faith"—for now they have truly entered the mysterious work of having faith. This is the person who, like Jacob and Job, dared to wrestle with God and make demands, who came out from the struggle limping but alive, having encountered a God beyond their comprehension.

I believe the book of Job should come with a warning label: for mature audiences only. You cannot enter and emerge unshaken, which I find to be so much like real life I am relieved to

know the Bible can be this graphically honest. I don't know about you, but I need a sacred book that doesn't sugarcoat reality or pretend there are easy answers to life's pain.

One thing I appreciate about God's answer to Job is that it moves him from the locality of his own suffering and out into the grandeur of nature. This is not to suggest that nature simply erases pain. But I cannot count the number of times in my life when I've taken my grief into the woods or to the pond or the lake, the mountains or the ocean. Over and over and over again I've hurled my rage into the sea. I've literally thrown rocks in the wilderness to express my frustration. And creation has never once failed to accept my rage and grief without flinching. The trees never dismiss me. The sky always accepts me. There is no voice of judgment in the ocean wave.

I may feel I will explode from the emotions of it all, but nature is always big enough to receive me. I never seem to overwhelm the mountains. I am not too much for the wind. I am no threat to the forces of nature, and so I hold nothing back. I bring my full self with all her sorrow, curiosity, passion, and knowing, and in the arms of creation I find rest. In the depths of my pain, I find I am still able to be surprised by beauty. It's not that my pain goes away but sometimes when I bring the bigness of my sorrow into nature and find it is not too much for creation to handle, the pain for a bit becomes smaller in perspective simply because the sky is so much bigger than me and has existed long before my troubles began and will exist after my joy returns and after I am gone from this earth.

For me, the majesty of creation ushers me into the bigness of God. A God who is never threatened by my feelings, my questions, my rage, or my pain. A God who can handle all that I am and all that I have to say without flinching or turning away or telling me to shut up. A God who is not frightened by my doubts or horrified by my wavering faith—a God who is big enough to accept both my imperfections and my full power, who delights in my humanness, my full personhood, the details that make me *me*.

I'm not sure if I'm right, but part of what I hear God saying to Job is that Job has no idea just how much God cares for creation. Just look at the stars, the sea, the dawn, the rooster. *O Job, do you really think I have forgotten you? That would be impossible. I am your Creator. I formed you. I set you in motion. I know everything about the world and everything about you. When in doubt, just think about this!*

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations? In your lifetime have you commanded the morning, informed the dawn of its place? Have you gone to the sea's sources, walked in the chamber of the deep? Have you surveyed earth's expanses? Where is darkness located? From whose belly does ice come; who gave birth to heaven's frost? Can you guide the stars? Can you issue an order to the clouds? Can you send lightning? Who gave understanding to a rooster?

See, you are so very small compared to me—which does not mean you are insignificant. It means I am big enough to take all your anger and hurt and never abandon you. I know none of it makes sense, but I do love you.

What if God's answer to Job is not a rebuke at all but an acceptance of Job's pain? What if God is inspiring awe in Job because God knows that when we grieve, we so easily lose our sense of

wonderment. Pain tends to block out everything else, but everything else is still there, waiting to be admired when you are ready to notice it again.

Maybe that is why God waited thirty-eight chapters to answer. Job wasn't ready. Understandably he wasn't ready to admire anything. Job needed time to process and rage and cry, give the finger to God's sky. Unlike Job's friends who could only keep silence with Job for seven days before they started trying to talk over his grief, God was far more patient. God waited and waited and waited while Job sobbed—not absent, just patient.

Unlike Job's friends, God did not try to answer the unanswerable or heap blame on top of Job's pain. It's almost like God is some kind of grief expert, like God too has borne such griefs and carried such sorrows that God gets it. Maybe, just maybe, God knows what loss is like and what it feels like to have the heart torn in two. Maybe, just maybe, our pain is small compared to the pain God has known on behalf of the world. Maybe God can handle all that we are feeling and all that we have known. Maybe, despite how quiet the heavens appear, God will truly never abandon nor forsake us. Maybe God is right here, counting every tear that falls from your eyes.

Let us pray: O God, there is so much about the world that we do not understand. There is so much pain and suffering and sometimes we are angry at you about that. Please hear our prayers and hold our varied feelings gently. Amen.