

God is in Control... But How?

Job 38:1-7 (34-41); Mark 10:35-45

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I want to begin by talking about Scripture readings in our service. Every Sunday we have at least one (sometimes more) reading at some point in the proceedings. We announce which book of the Bible the reading comes from, but these readings can often seem a bit isolated, like they have very little to do with each other.

I realize that this can seem a bit confusing. Often there is no context provided (except when Ernie reads!), and often, when there is more than one reading, we are jumping around in very different points in the biblical narrative.

This morning, for example, we heard an isolated passage from near the end of an ancient piece of poetry and a short excerpt of a narrative from near the end of Jesus' life and ministry.

In the Job text, we are jumping into the deep end of a long conversation in an ancient text that we know little about with no mention of what preceded it; in Mark, we are arriving close to the end of the story of Jesus' three-year ministry in Palestine.

Two very different texts from very different times and places and written for very different reasons.

So, all this is to say that if you sometimes find it difficult to get your bearings during the reading of Scripture, you're probably not alone. I feel the same way often!

My conviction is that it is important to hear Scripture read aloud, even if this is necessarily done in bits and pieces. Hopefully we can make some sense of these two very different texts in conversation with one another this morning.

We're going to begin with the text from Job.

We've been looking at Job for the last few weeks, but we have of course been skipping over massive parts of the book.

So, where are we in the story? We have seen Job, a righteous man who "feared God and shunned evil," become the subject of a kind of a cosmic bet between God and Satan—a bet which essentially had to do with whether or not Job was obedient to God simply because it was the right thing to do, or because of the goodies he could get out of the deal.

Essentially, Satan said Job is righteous because it is in Job's interests—because it benefits him. He's rich, he has a wonderful family, he's blessed in every material way. Why *wouldn't* he praise God? But take it all away, and then watch his righteousness and obedience crumble.

Our text from Job this morning comes at the conclusion of a very, *very* long argument (at our Wednesday Bible study this week, we came to the conclusion that Job and his friends could each have said what they needed to say in far fewer words 😊).

As we know, Job has been put through the wringer. He has suffered greatly, losing family, wealth, and, finally, health. He has lost everything and he has no idea why.

He is clinging to his faith by a thread.

He has not been helped by his three "friends" who continue to rehearse the piety of the day—a formulaic view of how God and human suffering fit together. Righteousness = blessing; sin = punishment (you might recall that we talked about faith as a formula in a sermon two weeks ago).

Job has been protesting his innocence for thirty-five or so odd chapters—to his friends, to God, to anyone who will listen! He has been lamenting, grieving, expressing his sadness, anger, confusion, grief, faith, and hope... he has been shaking his fist at the heavens, demanding an answer from God.

Well, in our text this morning Job gets his answer. God finally speaks. But the answer is nothing like what Job wanted or expected.

Job was looking for an explanation for why he was suffering. He was looking for vindication, for justice.

What he got was a rather stern (and lengthy) divine tour of creation.

“You want answers?” God says. “You want to hear from me? Okay, well brace yourself because here it comes!” What follows is an extended tutorial on the “bigness” of God and the “smallness” of Job!

- Were you there when I did this?
- Can you do that?
- Did you make this?
- Do you determine the limits of that?
- Do you have the wisdom to know this?

On and on and on it goes.

We only read a handful of verses from one chapter. This divine tutorial is actually four chapters long (Job 38-41). I can imagine that Job must felt like he was standing in front of a fire hydrant when all he wanted was a simple drink of water!

What Job hears is this: “I am God and you are not.”

I am in control here, not you.

It’s a harsh lesson. A necessary lesson, but still... It seems harsh.

If you’re like me, perhaps you wonder if God might not be coming down a little hard on poor Job. He’s had a rough few months, after all. And his questions sure *seemed* legitimate.

Sure God is in control—Job already knew that. In fact, his entire line of questioning *presupposed* that God was in charge and that God had a reason for allowing his suffering.

But this tour of creation... It doesn't really answer Job's questions about justice, fairness. It certainly doesn't vindicate Job's innocence.

Many people have commented on the fact that God's "answer" to Job looks like a giant exercise in God flexing his muscles and changing the subject. God doesn't *answer* Job so much as *overwhelm* him.

And, many people have a strong resistance to this presentation about the way God exercises control in the world, the way God relates to suffering.

There is perhaps no scene in world literature where this is more beautifully and forcefully presented than in Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Ivan Karamazov the older brother—a passionate intellectually astute atheist. Alyosha is his younger brother—barely twenty years old—who is a novice in the Russian Orthodox Church.

At one point in the story, Ivan and Alyosha are involved in a heated conversation about God and suffering. Ivan refuses to believe that God should permit any suffering to work out his plans for goodness in the world (Ivan calls this "eternal harmony"). Ivan doesn't need the comprehensive suffering of Job to make his point. He simply points to one small child who suffers—just one child. That is evidence enough that God is an incompetent ruler and must be rejected.

Ivan famously says these words to Alyosha:

While there is still time I shall hasten to guard myself, and so I decline the offer of eternal harmony altogether. It is not worth one single small tear of even one tortured little child that beat its breast with its little fist...

Later, Ivan says:

It isn't God that I don't accept, Alyosha, it's just his ticket that I most respectfully return to him.

For Ivan, the "price of admission" to accepting God as sovereign over this world with all of its suffering is too high. God may be in control, but if his kind of sovereignty over the

world requires or involves the kind of innocent suffering that we see, Ivan wants nothing to do with it.

This describes many people in our culture. Many people, when reading the story of Job, would prefer a response more like Ivan's than Job's.

"Very well then, I accept that you are powerful and that you are in control, but I want nothing to do with you."

Many people in our world have a hard time with a cosmic system where evil is somehow necessary or permissible as part of a divine package.

So what do we say?

Well, I think the first thing to say is that whenever we come across part of the Bible that strikes us as problematic or morally troubling or confusing or whatever, we remember to read it alongside *other* parts of the Bible.

As Mennonites, we have always read everything in Scripture with one eye on the gospels.

The fancy theological word for this is "Christocentrism." We believe that whatever *else* Scripture says about God, Jesus of Nazareth is the truest, most accurate picture of God that we have.

So, we read Job alongside the gospels.

And when we do so, interesting things show up.

We see, for example, that our gospel text today is *also* concerned with questions of power and control.

Like Job, James and John also have questions for God. Well, more *demands* than questions.

"Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

Of course, the other disciples get a little angry at this request and a bit of an argument ensues.

How does Jesus respond?

It's interesting to think about how Jesus *could* have responded—especially with the story of Job still ringing in our ears.

He *could* have said, “I am the Alpha and the Omega (Rev. 22:13), I was chosen from before the foundations of the earth (1 Peter 1:20), I am the one in whom and through whom all things were made (1 Cor. 8:6).

You are two sinful, confused, limited human beings who have no idea what you are asking. *Who do you two think you are, asking to reign with me?!*”

That would have been a fair response, right?

But that's not what Jesus does.

Instead, Jesus points to a different kind of sovereignty, a different kind of “control.” A control that does not overwhelm by force.

“That's how the world works,” he says, “But *not so among you!* Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all...”

“For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

If in Job we see a top-down display of control and sovereignty, in Mark we see God at work from the bottom-up.

This is, in effect, what Alyosha points to in response to his brother Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan asks Alyosha if he can accept that God's “system” requires innocent suffering:

‘No, I cannot. Brother,’ Alyosha said suddenly, his eyes flashing, ‘just now you said: “Is there in all the world a Being that could forgive and have the right to forgive?” Well, that Being does exist, and It can forgive everything, everyone, man and woman alike, *and for everything*, because It gave Its innocent blood for all things, and all men. You have forgotten about It, but on It the edifice is founded.

In other words, I don’t *know* how or why innocent suffering fits into God’s plan for the world, but I do know that Jesus is the true innocent sufferer who gave himself for the world. I do know that there is one who came not necessarily to *explain* or to justify but to serve and give himself away as a “ransom for many.”

So do our two texts point to two different Gods? The angry, severe, majestically sovereign God of Job and the humble servant God revealed by Jesus?

I don’t think so. I think we need both Job and Mark for the life of faith.

We need to hear the reminder from the book of Job that God is God and we are not.

Perhaps we who constantly swim in the cultural waters of individualism, where we are constantly told—in advertising, in political rhetoric, in the narcissistic realm of social media—that the world revolves around us and around our concerns and our questions... Perhaps we particularly need to hear this reminder.

We are not the center of the universe. There are things that we do not know, things that we cannot do, things that we are incapable of understanding.

We are responsible for bringing precisely nothing into existence. We know far less about universe supervision than we think we do.

God is God; we are not. And there are times when we would do well to simply acknowledge this and humbly submit before our maker.

But we also need the reminder from Mark that there is more to the story of God’s sovereignty than we see in Job. We are further ahead in the story.

We need to hear the truth that, given all of the options the God of the universe presumably had for disclosing himself to humanity, given all of the possibilities God presumably had for leading the story of his world to its destiny and goal, God chose a very unlikely path.

Servanthood. Service. Sacrifice. Giving *up* power. Working in ways that confound our expectations of authority and control and sovereignty.

These two conceptions of God can seem to be in profound tension with one another. But I think we need to live with this tension, because both tell the truth about who God is and about how God works in our lives and in our world.

So what is the word of the Lord from these two texts to *us*?

Two things:

1. When we suffer, we can remember that there is more to the story than we can possibly know. Our God is very big. There is much that we do not see, much that we cannot understand. And even if we can't understand, we can trust. And we can hope.
2. When we suffer, we can remember that in Christ, God himself is the one true innocent sufferer, and that we do not suffer alone. Jesus has walked the road of pain and tears before us, and Jesus will lead us through even the darkest valley to the other side. This much, we *can* understand.

One final thing. In Ephesians 5:1 we are told to "be imitators of God, as dearly beloved children."

What, specifically, are we to imitate about God?

I think that when it comes to imitating God, we look to Mark, not to Job.

We do not imitate God in his providential, sovereign majesty. We do not imitate God by imagining that we are powerful and wise. We imitate God in service and sacrifice. We "live lives of love," as Paul says. We "give ourselves up for others," just like Jesus did.

And, ironically, we can imitate the God we see in Jesus precisely *because* God is sovereign in the way described in Job.

We can give ourselves away even when it seems foolish to do so because we believe that, ultimately, the Creator of the world *is* in control, has bound himself to his children and to his world, and will do what is just.

May God help us to live in this mystery with confidence, joy, and hope... and when appropriate with lament and confusion, and honesty.

Amen.

