

KNOWING ABOUT GOD....

JOB 42:1-6, 10-17

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If you have heard me preach over any extended period of time you are aware that my texts do not usually come from the Old Testament and that is probably not good. After all, we all know that the Old Testament was the scriptures of our Lord. The people who heard the angels sing *"Joy to the World, the Lord has come!"* are people who understood those words through the lens of the Old Testament scripture and their understanding of the promise of the Messiah. The struggles that Jesus had teaching his disciples and in his discussions with the leaders of the temple and synagogue were their understanding of the Old Testament, or perhaps it was their mis-understanding of the scriptures.

And so, as we come to the book of Job we need to remember that it was written by a person who, using the story of Job and his problems, was wrestling with the same problems that humankind has been dealing with from the beginning of time.

The book of Job is not grouped with the books known as Wisdom Literature if you go by where it appears in the Bible, but it is found in the list of those wisdom books when people write about them. I say that because the issue being dealt with in Job follows comfortably after reading Ecclesiastes 8:16-17. There we read,¹⁶ *"When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to see the business that is done on earth, how one's eyes see sleep neither day nor night, ¹⁷ then I saw all the work of God, that no one can find out what is happening under the sun. However much they may toil in seeking, they will not find it out; even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out."*

In the final analysis our text for this morning from Job comes toward the end of the book and brings some final conclusions to the book of Job, even if it is not the ending we were seeking. The book is about the question of the meaning of life—this solitary person who thinks, loves, remembers, and hopes, lives, and dies, the writer looking intensely into the depths of one man's existence, and in so doing exposes the *"human"* question. Job is some ways who we might call Everyman.

Many people assume that the purpose of the book of Job is to discuss the problem of suffering or other evil, or to raise the philosophical question of how absolute goodness and absolute power are reconciled in the nature of God. But if we are approaching this book expecting to find answers to these questions we will be disappointed.

We also often talk about the *"patience of Job."* But if you read the story from beginning to end we will not find that Job is not patient at all. Job is not patient with God, he is not patient with himself, and he definitely is not patient with his three friends who come to comfort him in his misery. Job is upset, he is wanting an answer to the questions of the evil that has befallen him and he wants it now!

It has probably been a while since most of us have read the book of Job, so we would probably need to take a quick look at the layout of the book.

It begins with a description of this person called Job and how successful he was, how large a family he had, how many possessions he had, how blameless he was. But the story quickly changes when the Lord and Satan get into a discussion about God's servant Job. Satan said to God your man Job has every right to be a prosperous and righteous man because you put a fence around him to keep him safe. If this were taken away and Job were to lose all of this it would be a different story.

So, he does lose everything he has his cattle, land, his family and even his health taken away.

He has three friends who hear about his troubles and decide to come and visit him. To begin with, after they had arrived and observed Job and all of his misery, they did not say anything to him because

they realized how much he was suffering. They were going to let Job speak first. And finally, he did!

He began by saying, *“Let the day perish in which I was born...”* And the entire chapter after those words followed that pattern. He is upset. Only then did his friends begin to speak and the first to speak was Eliphaz who accused Job of sinning. He said, *“Think now, whoever was innocent ever experienced these things?”* Job insisted to his friend they he had not sinned but even so after chapters explaining his innocence his second friend Bildad was not convinced and again told Job he should repent. And his third friend Zophar joined in with suggesting that Job’s sins surely did deserve punishment.

If I had friends like these I truly hope they are too busy to come and visit me at the hospital when I am sick or at funeral home when I have experienced some loss of family or close friend. They would not be very helpful to me.

This discussion goes on back and forth and Job insists on a word with God about all his complaints. And after most of the book goes on like this God answers him out of a whirlwind. He says to Job: *“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?”*

³ *Gird up your loins like a man; I will question you, and you shall declare to me.*

⁴ *“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?”*

Tell me, if you have understanding.

⁵ *Who determined its measurements—surely you know!*

Or who stretched the line upon it?

⁶ *On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone*

⁷ *when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings^[a] shouted for joy?*

⁸ *“Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb,*

⁹ *when I made the clouds its garment and thick darkness its swaddling band,*

¹⁰ *and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors,*

¹¹ *and said, ‘Thus far shall you come and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped’?*

¹² *“Have you commanded the morning since your days began
and caused the dawn to know its place,*

¹³ *so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth,
and the wicked be shaken out of it?*

¹⁴ *It is changed like clay under the seal,
and it is dyed^[a] like a garment.*

¹⁵ *Light is withheld from the wicked,
and their uplifted arm is broken.*

¹⁶ *“Have you entered into the springs of the sea
or walked in the recesses of the deep?*

¹⁷ *Have the gates of death been revealed to you,
or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?*

¹⁸ *Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?*

Declare if you know all this.

This goes on through chapters 38-42 until we get to the final chapter of the book of Job and it is there that we find the Job is humbled and satisfied. In chapter 42 we read: *“Then Job answered the Lord:*

² *“I know that you can do all things and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.*

³ *‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’*

Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me that I did not know.

⁴ 'Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.'

⁵ I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see you;

⁶ therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

What I would like for us to notice is that God doesn't supply simple "answers" or any smooth theological explanations of why bad things happen to good people when God answers from the whirlwind. God doesn't explain how the moral calculus works or doesn't. God instead takes Job on a tour of creation — not the pretty places in creation, but the wild, inaccessible, puzzling, explicable places. God doesn't point to the house cat or the hunting dog who do our bidding, or a caged parrot. God indirectly suggests to Job that what God fashioned is not a neat world where everything fits together snugly and all is fair and placid. It's dangerous out there, it's amazing out there. The speech clearly undercuts a too-small-God theology we talked about last week from J.B. Philips book, *Your God Is Too Small*.

Partly, God invites us to hear God's voice in nature. John Muir, after exploring Yosemite Park wrote: "*As long as I live, I'll hear waterfalls and birds and winds sing. I'll interpret the rocks, learn the language of flood, storm, and the avalanche. I'll acquaint myself with the glaciers and wild gardens and get as near to the heart of the world as I can.*"

It's worth noting that it's not just the wildness God points to. There's a lot of birthing going on, startling new life. Job cursed the day of his birth and feels everything is over. But God shows him new life bursting forth in the wild haunts of animals. Even the ocean is spoken of as being birthed.

Martin Buber, weighing the speech of God in light of the progress of the entire story, suggested wisely that the Book of Job guides us from the view that God is cruel (chapters 1-2) to a retributive God (the friends' speeches in 4-11), to a hidden God (the one who simply refuses to respond to Job through chapters 3-37), and finally then to a God of revelation, a God who is present and relational.

You see, in the end, Job doesn't get answers. But Job does get God.

That is why I entitled the sermon "*Knowing about God...*" to be finished by saying, "*Knowing about God...is not knowing God.*"

We need to see that God doesn't float down rewards or blessings or things. God's gift is God. Jesus gave them his body and blood and invited them to continue receiving him. His nickname, after all, is Emmanuel.

Or, as Anderson puts it in one of my Old Testament books from seminary days, "*That God speaks at all is enough for Job. All he needs to know is that everything is still all right between himself and God... It does not matter much what they talk about. Any topic will do for a satisfying conversation between friends.*"

We need to hear with some excitement (after reading through the misery found in most of the chapters, met only by extended silence, and then the whirlwind tour of the wildness of creation) Job's final words to the Lord, "*I know you can do anything.*" They are a sober, hard-won affirmation of divine omnipotence, which was never doubted by Job or anybody else. The shape of that omnipotence, what God does with God's unlimited power is always the question. Omnipotence is hard to love. God's power is expended in creating life in the thick of death, relationship in the midst of loneliness, a dazzling dance of light and darkness. God "*can do anything,*" and so God is not imprisoned by human notions of right and wrong; God isn't stuck rewarding the righteous or punishing the wicked. God quite freely reigns. Only when God is thus free can God be a God of mercy.

Job quotes the Lord's own opening volley back to God when he speaks in our text today. "*Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?*" He realizes it's not that he lacked knowledge or was wrong in

his knowledge. He's now been granted a fuller, deeper knowledge. He's learned plenty about frost and goats and lions, stars, and alligators. But the great lesson for Job is there in 42:5: *"My ears had heard about you, but now my eyes have seen you."* How often do we know things about God, without knowing God? Job and his friends had been clinging to a god who was nothing but their notions of right and wrong, the great arbitrator. The true God is greater, better, more mystifying, and wonderful.

Many have suggested the language lets us hear Job humbly declare *"Therefore I relent."* Not *repent!* but *relent.* Job doesn't confess his sin; and God never asks him to. Job gives up his mistaken understandings of God. He is disillusioned – meaning his illusions have been shattered—as now he sees the true God who isn't the righteous judge but the profligate creator of life and mystery, the one who speaks, and is with us.

There are few of us who will ever experience suffering to the degree that Job suffered. Yet suffering is part of the human condition that we all will experience in some form or another. This text reminds us that even for the faithful, God is bigger than our understanding. Not one of us corners the market on understanding God. On the one hand, the idea that humans do not have the capacity to understand God's will and ways is scary. If our understanding of God is limited, then we are vulnerable and out of control. We must truly trust God's design and care for us. On the other hand, as scary as this seems, it is liberating. We are not in control. We do not have to understand it all and answer every question. There is mystery for which we are not responsible. God is the one in control. Our responsibility is to follow God and not to lay the plans.

This text challenges us on two fronts. First of all, we are challenged to accept the truth with which the Lord confronted Job. We do not fully understand God. God is bigger and more complicated than our human minds can comprehend. We no sooner could determine God's reasoning for suffering or pain than we could understand the methods of God's creation. Being a person of faith means that we accept our limited understanding and trust the Lord.

Second, because we cannot fully understand God's will and design, we should not try to answer for God. This is a wonderful reminder for Christians. So often as Christians we feel the need to defend God by explaining God's actions in every situation. In the parish setting, it is not unusual for pastors to walk in on a conversation in which one Christian is explaining another's tragedy or suffering.

For some reason we are so uncomfortable with God's mystery that we feel the need to constantly explain God's ways. Yet, in my own life, I know that in times of suffering I have been most comforted when a fellow Christian has admitted not understanding God's actions but instead offered the inherent comfort promised and offered by God. This would have been just as powerful a reminder to Job and his friends as it is to us. On this day, let us embrace the wonderful news that we are not expected to have or give the answers to the questions that God posed to Job for several chapters. We just give glory to God for being a God of mystery and grace and love, and promise.

The mystery of suffering is rationally left unanswered in Job as it is in the rest of the Bible, as a whole. Because the crux of the human problem is not the fact of suffering but the character of man's relationship with God. Outside the relationship for which man was created, suffering drives man to despair or to the easy solutions of popular religion. Within the relationship of faith, suffering may be faced in the confidence that man's times are in God's hands and that *"in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose."* Rom. 8:28