

The Comforting Whirlwind

Proper 25: Job

In the year 1889, after several days of torrential rain, the South Fork dam on the Little Conemaugh River catastrophically failed. Hemmed in by steep mountainsides and located in the hills outside of Pittsburgh, the city of Johnstown, Pennsylvania sat fourteen miles upstream from the dam. When the levy broke on May 31, it instantly released a surge of fifteen million cubic meters of water upon Johnstown, sending a volumetric flow rate that temporarily equaled that of the entire Mississippi River upon its unsuspecting citizens.

Over two thousand people died in the Johnstown Flood. Prior to the Galveston Flood and the September 11 terrorist attacks, the Johnstown Flood was the deadliest disaster in American history. Many of today's liability laws are the result of the flood's victims failing to win civil suits against those whose negligence led to the dam break. As David McCullough notes in his book, *The Johnstown Flood*, images and newspaper accounts of the devastation transfixed the nation in a manner similar to the way the wildfires out west have held our collective attention. So much so, many preachers in the immediate aftermath of the flood stepped up into their pulpits with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, delivering "countless sermons on 'The Meaning of the Johnstown Flood Disaster.'" Such sermons were the preaching themes for many Sundays thereafter. The biblical story of Noah, McCullough reports, was expounded from many pulpits all over America by preachers who presumed their congregations were bedeviled by the question, "Why? Why has this happened? Why did God allow this to happen? How could a good God let....?"

McCullough details the bitter amusement and ironic scorn with which the actual victims of the flood greeted these homiletical endeavors. They ridiculed the suggestion, McCullough writes, that preacher and churchgoers would interpret their misfortune as the wrath of God. As their eventual court battles could attest, the survivors of the Johnstown Flood knew their suffering had been caused not by divine Providence but by the callous negligence and malignant ineptitude of those in charge of the South Fork dam; specifically, they blamed not the Almighty but the wealthy robber barons, Andrew Carnegie, Andrew Mellon, and Henry Clay Frick, who, despite repeated warnings, failed to keep the earthen dam at their elite fishing club in sound repair. "Maybe the Lord God brought the rain," one survivor said, "but those in charge made the suffering of it much worse."

David McCullough recounts a testimony from the devastation: “The flood and the night that had followed, for all their terror and destruction and suffering, had had a terrible majesty. Many people thought it was Judgment Day...that the whole world was being destroyed and not just Johnstown. It had come as destruction from the Almighty. It had been awful, but it had been God-awful.”

The awful but almightiness of it all drew people to Johnstown in the days immediately after the flood. They wanted to see such power for themselves. The site of the flood in its full power, one survivor testified, “was the grandest scene I ever witnessed.”

It is this very same display of ineffable, incomprehensible almightiness that finally quiets the complaints of Job. You know the Old Testament. Job, a man in the land of Uz, a man blessed with seven sons and three daughters, a rich man in possession of seven thousand sheep and five hundred yoke of oxen, a righteous man, blameless and upright who feared God above else, by providential decree, Job loses everything. His estate is taken from him by marauders. His home is burned by fire. His family is killed by a devastating wind. And then Job is plagued by a contagion and sores erupt all over his body. To make matters worse, in his suffering, Job is consoled by three insufferable friends who dispense pieties and the cold comfort of empty explanations.

Eventually Job explodes, indicting God for his poor job performance, “Oh that I had one to hear me! Here is my signature! Let the Almighty answer me!” Job registers his grievances for thirty-five long chapters in the Book of Job. From chapter three to chapter thirty-eight, the book is nothing but Job complaining about the cosmic injustice he’s suffering and petitioning for a lawsuit hearing against God.

It’s important to point out that despite its reputation as such the Book of Job is not an attempt to explain the mystery of suffering. “Why do bad things happen to good people?” is not a biblical question because, as Jesus himself says, “No one is good but God alone.” Nor does the Book of Job intend to answer the other very modern question about God’s existence: “Is there a God given a world of such suffering?” The Book of Job simply sets to the side the question of what merits our suffering, and God’s existence is taken for granted in the book; in fact, God is the active agent of everything in the book.

The Book of Job is not an explanation.
The Book of Job is a rage against explanation.
Job does not receive the reasons for his suffering.
Job receives a revelation.

And to the incredulity of many modern readers, that's enough for Job.

God finally responds to Job's indictments by appearing amidst a whirlwind summoning Job to behold not his own situation but the creation itself.

“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.

‘Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.

‘Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?
Do you observe the calving of the deer?

Can you number the months that they fulfill,
and do you know the time when they give birth?’”

Taken on one level, God's mighty address in reply to Job's complaints sounds extraordinarily irrelevant. God never gives Job the response Job has sought. But taken on an altogether different level, God's reply from the whirlwind renders the questions to which Job has sought answers obsolete. God's answer for Job is no answer at all, yet it satisfies Job totally. Job forgets all his sufferings and grievances. Job abandons all the many words he has uttered over thirty-five chapters. Job replies sparingly to the Lord's interrogation:

“I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.”

God condescends. God comes to meet Job, the grandest scene Job has ever witnessed. In great power, in a display of godawful almightiness, the Lord reveals himself to Job in a whirlwind, and that revelation reconfigures everything for Job. Job has pleaded with God for answers about his trials and hardships, but now, face-

to-face with the greatness of God, Job's suffering is incidental to the point of no longer being interesting to him. God, says Fleming Rutledge, gives Job not answers or explanations but a new epistemology; that is, a new way of knowing, a new way of seeing the world and his place in it.

“I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you;
therefore I despise my words,
and repent in dust and ashes.””

And Job says no more.

From a prison cell he will not leave alive, the Apostle Paul writes to the Philippians, “For to me living is Christ and dying is gain.”

Can you imagine one of the hundreds of thousands lost in the pandemic saying to a loved one (over Zoom), “To live is Christ, and to die is gain?”

Of course not, you'd think them callous or crazy.

What accounts, then, for Paul's ability to center his life and death wholly in Christ and to center his concern not on his life or death but on the advancement of the Gospel?

Paul, don't forget, lost nearly as much as Job. He lost his status and the community that came with it. He'd been beaten and scorned. He'd been rejected by those Christ called him to lead. He'd been shipwrecked, attacked by lions, and arrested at least three times. He'd lost his sight, and, in the Letter to the Philippians, he's about to lose his life. But all he cares about is the spread of the Gospel, for “To live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

Like Job, Paul has lost much. And like Job, Paul has suffered mightily—he bears the wounds of Christ in his own body, Paul writes to the Galatians. But like Job, Paul has been encountered by the power and majesty, the godawful almightiness of God, and it has reconfigured everything for Paul.

When Karl Barth saw the Christians of his own time and place succumb to the idols of nationalism and nativism and racism, he said the only antidote was for the Church to rediscover “the God-ness of God.”

Having shaped God into our image, Barth meant, the Church needed to be encountered once again by the incomprehensibility of God—the God who reveals himself from the whirlwind. The God who cannot be conjured by our own projections and imaginings.

The God who can only be known by us through revealing himself to us.

The God of wind and storm, fire and flood, the God who is “infinitely greater than the sum of all natural phenomenon put together,” the God who knows the number of the hairs upon your head and when the mountain goats give birth—that is the same God who reveals himself to Job, the God who reveals himself to Saul in the resurrected flesh of the crucified Christ. Or, as Paul marvels in the next chapter of his prison letter, “Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...”

The power of God that draws onlookers to devastated places like Johnstown made powerless. Majesty made visible in weakness.

Paul too was encountered by the Comforting Whirlwind.
The treasure in the field has found him.
The pearl of great price has obtained him at great cost.

And whereas Job departs the comforting whirlwind mute over the greatness of God, Paul rests in prison absolutely loquacious about the grace of God, such that the advancement of the Gospel is now the entire meaning and measure of his existence, compared to which his own imprisonment is no longer very interesting.

He'd been given a new epistemology, a new way of knowing, a new way of seeing the world and his place in it.

And his place in the world— *your* place in the world— is *in* Christ.

Paul doesn't mean that metaphorically. That's why he can say “To live is Christ, and to die is gain.” Living or not, on account of Jesus Christ, your true location in God's creation will not change, can not change. As Paul tells the Colossians, your life is hid with God in Jesus Christ. You belong to Christ, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, and Christ belongs to God; therefore, death holds no terrors. And because you are in Christ, Paul tells the Corinthians, the only

difference between life and death is that in death you will see what now can only be known by faith.

This is the sense in which Paul can speak of death as “gain.” Or, as Paul puts it to the Roman church, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.”

Notice the connection—

Our future is incomparable because even at this present moment our lives are hid in the One who is incomprehensible apart from incarnation, unknowable without his gracious self-revealing.

In *The Johnstown Flood*, David McCullough reports how Reverend T. DeWitt Talmadge, a celebrated Presbyterian preacher in NYC, shortly after the flood, took Psalm 93 as his sermon text: “The floods have lifted up their voice...the floods lift up their roaring. Mightier than the thunders of many waters, mightier than the waves of the sea, the Lord on high is mighty!”

Reverend Talmadge knew his Bible, and, a few years earlier than Karl Barth, Reverend Talmadge knew about the God-ness of God too. He knew, popular sentiments to the contrary, that the Bible teaches that God is not *in* nature. The God of Holy Scripture is neither an extension of nature nor co-existent with nature. Mountains and rivers and fires and flowers and sunsets may testify to the glory of God, but the Maker of Heaven and Earth who created them all *ex nihilo* is not in any of them. God is separate from them, infinitely and qualitatively different from all of them and all of us. The voice of the Lord is not in the waters, it is “*upon* the waters.” The Lord sits *enthroned* over the flood, says the Psalmist.

In his sermon for over five thousand worshippers that Sunday, Reverend Talmadge preached that those who want “only the religion of sunshine, blue sky, and beautiful grass would soon discover that nature is merciless.”

“Let me ask such persons,” Talmadge said, “what they make of the floods in Pennsylvania.” Today, we could update Reverend Talmadge’s sermon with addendum of our own.

“Let me ask such persons what they make of the virus in the air.”

Of course, don't forget, just like "such persons" we lack answers to the questions asked by a suffering world. We do not have any insight or understanding that "such persons" lack. We instead have a God who is beyond any of our understanding. It may sound odd—unhelpful even. It may strike you as strangely irrelevant as the Lord's answer to Job's understandable questions and legitimate grievances, but the Apostle Paul's from prison is a reminder to us that from the very beginning Christians have found hope and taken comfort in the God-ness of God.

Throughout the centuries, beleaguered believers have sought refuge by contemplating the greatness of God. If this incomprehensible glory is what will be revealed to us in the future, if one day we shall know by sight the greatness of God that quiets all our questions, then in this age such comfort can be known only by faith.

One cannot know the solace found in the almightiness of God apart from having been met by the Living God. Only someone who has been grasped by Almighty God Himself can utter such an otherwise ridiculous claim as the one the Apostle Paul makes, "To live is Christ, and to die is gain." Indeed we cannot fully grasp the magnitude of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ unless we also understand the unimaginable power Jesus Christ possesses with the Father. As Paul marvels, "Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross."

Does knowing this by faith mean that believers will always be spared dark nights or delivered from trials and hardships? No.

Does knowing "How great is our God" solve the problem of suffering or the mystery of evil? No.

Does believing "To live is Christ, and to die is gain" make living less of a struggle or dying no longer sorrowful? No.

If Job leaves from his encounter with the Lord with every single one of his questions still unanswered and if Paul leaves his prison cell to suffer an ignoble death, then there are many questions to which this mortal life will not yield answers.

Of course, if God had given us an explanation for the suffering of the world, then, as Stanley Hauerwas says, we should worship that explanation.

Instead God the Father has given us his Son and the Son has given us his Spirit, three-in-one, the blessed Trinity, an incomprehensible reality which nevertheless meets us in the Word, in Water and Wine and Bread and which may—just wait and see—reconfigure all your questions.

From his own prison cell in Nazi Germany, the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to a friend, “Only the Suffering God can help us.”

He was talking about the God-ness of God.

Only the God who is beyond our understanding, a carpenter born to Mary who yet knows the time the mountain goats give birth, can save us.

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