

The Why's God

Job 38:1-11, 34-41
(and selections from Job 39)
Sermon by Mark Schloneger
October 17, 2021

You know, before Monday, running had never been an activity
that provoked deep emotions in me.
Yet, on Monday, running the Boston Marathon,
I found myself fighting back tears and failing.

It was at mile 17.

That was the mile where my family was watching.
I stopped to hug them, and I was so happy to see them,
but that's not what provoked my tears.

No, it was just before I saw them,
when I passed the Newton-Wellesley Hospital.

Completely covering the hospital's front lawn,
were 2,204 purple and red flags.

Each flag represented a person in Massachusetts
who died this past year from an opioid overdose.

I had been looking for my family
who I knew would be just ahead, somewhere,
but I was abruptly reminded of who wouldn't – my sister.

She died from an opioid overdose
five years ago this November.

I thought about the pain and suffering that she experienced in her life
beginning in her earliest years, before she was adopted into our family.

And I thought about how opioids like heroin, fentanyl,
and prescription drugs given and taken carelessly,
have perpetuated this pain in so many families, including ours.

The memorial stood at Mile 17.

I was expecting a reunion, looking forward to it,
but I got there first.

And I wasn't prepared.

Isn't that how it often is?

We think we know what's coming --

we anticipate it, we prepare for it, we look for it,
and then something else comes in its place

to throw off our carefully laid plans and expectations,
to remind us of not what we have but what we've lost:
a death, a divorce, a diagnosis, a disease, a dismissal, a departure,
a pandemic.

And we wonder, how did I, how did we,

how did this one I hold so close to my bones that I'd give my life for them . . .

wind up here?

And why?

And then you find yourself wide awake at 3 am, again,
caught between a yesterday that you want to forget
and a tomorrow that will never let you.

Why, God?

God, why?

That's why I'm drawn to the book of Job.

Job makes no effort to gloss over that question,
to explain people's pain and suffering with easy answers.

In fact, Job emphatically rejects the prevailing explanation for suffering in that day,
one that continues to this day.

That is, the righteous prosper, and the guilty suffer.

God is just, and so God will allow suffering where it is deserved.

If then, you are suffering, well, you must deserve it.

Repent, and you will be blessed.

That's the way it works.

Get with the program, get over your pride, get on with your life,
and God will bless you in your righteousness.

But almost the entire book of Job is filled with explanations like these
and Job's rejection of them and refusal to let God off the hook.

He was innocent of anything to have provoked the extent of his suffering.

And because he was innocent,

his worldview permitted him only two options –
either God was not just
or God was not present, sleeping on the job.

Why God?

God, why?

Answer me.

Job waits and waits and waits for a response to satisfy his questions.

And then, finally, God speaks.

I'll be reciting selections from Job, chapter 38 and 39.

Why God?

God, why?

Answer me.

Job waits and waits and waits for a response to satisfy his questions.

Job 38, beginning with verse 1.

Then the Lord answered Job from the whirlwind:

*"Who is this that questions my wisdom
with such ignorant words?*

*Brace yourself, [prepare yourself]
because I have some questions for you,
and you must answer them.*

“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?

Tell me, if you know so much.

*Who determined its dimensions
and stretched out the surveying line?*

*What supports its foundations,
and who laid its cornerstone
as the morning stars sang together
and all the angels shouted for joy?*

*“Who kept the sea inside its boundaries
as it burst from the womb,*

*and as I clothed it with clouds
and wrapped it in thick darkness?*

*For I locked it behind barred gates,
limiting its shores.*

I said, ‘This far and no farther will you come.

Here your proud waves must stop!’ (Job 38:1-11, NLT)

“Who created a channel for the torrents of rain?

Who laid out the path for the lightning?

*Who makes the rain fall on barren land,
in a desert where no one lives?*

*Who sends rain to satisfy the parched ground
and make the tender grass spring up?*

“Does the rain have a father?

Who gives birth to the dew?

Who is the mother of the ice?

Who gives birth to the frost from the heavens? (vv. 25-29)

*“Can you shout to the clouds
and make it rain?*

*Can you make lightning appear
and cause it to strike as you direct?*

*Who gives intuition to the heart
and instinct to the mind?*

Who is wise enough to count all the clouds?

*Who can tilt the water jars of heaven
when the parched ground is dry
and the soil has hardened into clods?*

*“Can you stalk prey for a lioness
and satisfy the young lions’ appetites*

*as they lie in their dens
or crouch in the thicket?*

*Who provides food for the ravens
when their young cry out . . . [“God, God, God”]
and wander about in hunger? (vv. 34-41)*

“Do you know when the wild goats give birth?

Have you watched as deer are born in the wild?

*Do you know how many months they carry their young?
Are you aware of the time of their delivery?
They crouch down to give birth to their young
and deliver their offspring.
Their young grow up in the open fields,
then leave home and never return.*

*“Who gives the wild donkey its freedom?
Who untied its ropes?
I have placed it in the wilderness;
its home is the wasteland.
It hates the noise of the city
and has no driver to shout at it.
The mountains are its pastureland,
where it searches for every blade of grass. (39:1-8)*

*“Have you given the horse its strength
or clothed its neck with a flowing mane?
Did you give it the ability to leap like a locust? (vv. 19-20)*

*“Is it your wisdom that makes the hawk soar
and spread its wings toward the south?*

*Is it at your command that the eagle rises
to the heights to make its nest? (vv. 26-27)*

Then the Lord said to Job,

*“Do you still want to argue with the Almighty?
You are God’s critic, but do you have the answers?” (40:1-2)*

Why, God?

God, why?

Well, Job never gets the answer to that question, does he?

In fact, at first, it can almost seem like God responds to Job’s questions
in a bullying way,
belittling him for daring to question God’s wisdom and power.

And, yet, there was God, the Creator, responding to Job,
and, in so doing, giving him a deeper understanding
both of God’s majesty, God’s power
and of God’s intimacy, God’s gentleness.

From the Powerful Lord -- the One who laid the foundations of the earth,
who set the boundaries of the seas, who traced the rivers,
and who flung the stars and clouds into the sky,
to the loving mother, the One whose power also nurtures the most desolate places with rain,
who hears the hunger cries of raven hatchlings,
who midwives the calving of goats and deer,
and who delights in knowing the most intimate
characteristics of wild donkeys, oxen, ostriches, horses, hawks, and eagles.

We have a tendency to assume that every question has a single answer;
that every problem presents a single solution.
If one works hard at it, we think, then the answer will appear,
the problem will be resolved, and things will get better.
Sometimes, we think that more study and more prayer
will result in knowing the answers to our deepest questions.
But Job teaches us that there is no single answer that can put an end
to some questions once and for all.
Sometimes, meaning and peace
are not to be found in pre-packaged answers
but emerge from the experience of wrestling with God.

Kate Bowler is a professor at Duke Divinity School,
and her focus has been studying the prosperity gospel,
a creed that sees fortune as a blessing from God
and misfortune as a mark of God's disapproval.

Sound familiar?

When she turned thirty-five, everything in her life seems to point toward "blessing."
She was thriving in her job, she was happily married,
and she was loving life with her newborn son.
Then she was diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer.

The prospect of her own death forced her to realize
that she had been tacitly subscribing to the prosperity gospel that she studied.
She had been living with the conviction
that she could control the shape of her life with hard work and determination.

Her book, *Everything Happens for a Reason, and Other Lies I've Loved*,¹
details her rejection of that understanding of God,
and her embrace of a deeper relationship with God.

It's a heart wrenching, beautiful book, beautifully written,
and I highly recommend it.

"Control is a drug," she writes, "and we are all hooked,
whether or not we believe in the prosperity gospel's assurance
that we can master the future with our words and attitudes."

"If I were to invent a sin to describe [how I had been living],
I would not say it was simply that I didn't stop to smell the roses.
It was the sin of arrogance, of becoming impervious to life itself.
I failed to love what was present and decided to love what was possible instead."²

Throughout the dialogue between Job and his friends,
from chapter 3 to chapter 38,
God is referred to 143 times but only twice as Yahweh,
the covenant name of Israel's God.
In the other 141 times,
God is referred to with some variation of El Shaddai,

¹ Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved* (New York: Random House, 2018).

² Ibid.

which is most often translated as the Almighty, or the Almighty God.
But when God speaks – in the first two chapters and
then when God addresses Job directly,
God is referred to most often as Yahweh,
and that continues in the last chapter, chapter 42.

El Shaddai is the word of the omnipotent creator of the universe --
the God of the heavens who rules with power and might
and puts order in the universe.

Yahweh is the name for the Redeemer of Israel.

The God of covenant.

The God of the patriarchs and matriarchs.

The God who speaks.

The God who hears.

Yahweh is the God of the burning bush who said to Moses,
“I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt.
I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers,
and I am concerned about their suffering.
So I have come down to rescue them
from the hand of the Egyptians
and to bring them up out of that land
into a good and spacious land,
a land flowing with milk and honey.” (Exodus 3:7-8)

El Shaddai and Yahweh are the same God, but Job’s experience of suffering
opened him to have a broader picture of who this God is.

I think it is significant that it is Yahweh who bets on Job in the first chapters
and it is Yahweh who speaks to him at the end.

Yahweh is not aloof, not indifferent, not absent.

Yahweh cares. Yahweh loves. Yahweh desires relationship.

Why, God?

God, why?

Yes, it’s okay to ask that question.

But sometimes we can get locked in so completely on ourselves --
our suffering, our needs, our desire for knowledge --
that we fail to recognize God’s freedom to reveal God’s self
to us in a completely new way.

And so, as we ask “why” – Why me? Why him or her? Why this? Why not that? --
perhaps we should accompany those questions with another one,
one we often forget.

It is really the same question, but it refers to something else.

Why, God?

Why the cross?

For that question, we might find more of the answer that we’re searching for.

*“For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him*

*may not perish but may have eternal life.
Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world,
but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (John 3:16-17)*

Kate Bowler writes,

*I can't reconcile the way that the world is jolted by events that are wonderful and terrible,
the gorgeous and the tragic.
Except that I am beginning to believe that these opposites
do not cancel each other out.
I see a middle-aged woman in the waiting room of the cancer clinic,
her arms wrapped around the frail frame of her son.
She squeezes him tightly,
oblivious to the way he looks down at her sheepishly.
He laughs after a minute, a hostage to her impervious love.
Joy persists somehow and I soak it in.
The horror of cancer has made everything seem like it is painted in bright colors.
I think the same thoughts again and again.
Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard.”*

*“What would it mean to give up that little piece of the American Dream that says,
"You are limitless"?*
*Everything is not possible.
The mighty kingdom of God is not yet here.
What if 'rich' did not have to mean 'wealthy',
and 'whole' did not have to mean 'healed'?*
*What if being the people of "the gospel"
meant that we are simply people with good news?
God is here. We are loved. It is enough.³*

God is here. We are loved. It is enough.

It is enough.

³ Ibid.