

Sermon: Out of the Whirlwind

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Job 38:1-11; Mark 4:35-41**

The Book of Job is a kind of bridge between the mythological literature of the ancient Near East and Hebrew Scripture. It's a narrative with poetry; it's a wisdom book that also includes the imagery of long-ago myths from the surrounding cultures. It has suffering; it has hope; it asks questions. It has a happy if unsatisfying ending. It's got everything. But mostly, it wrestles with the problem of suffering in the world. It's the one book we have that questions God's motives and character.

Why the lectionary pairs it with this reading from Mark might not be clear, unless we count God speaking as the common link between the two.

God was quite chatty in Hebrew Scripture, but over time became more and more quiet, to the point where God is now nearly silent. But the Gospels continually remind us that God spoke through Jesus.

In First Kings, [God said to Elijah,] "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire – *a sound of sheer silence* (1 Kings 19:11-12).

Some translators prefer to say *a gentle breeze, a soft murmuring sound, or a still, small voice over a sound of sheer silence*, because those imply that God is still speaking, and in fact, in the next verse, a voice *said* to Elijah, 'Why are you here?'

But in Job, the LORD most definitely spoke out of the whirlwind, and said, 'Get ready, Job, because here it comes.' Then God takes Job on a tour of the cosmos all while asking pointed questions that Job cannot answer. But Job gets his hearing with God, even if now it's God doing all the talking.

Job is upright and blameless, a man who worshipped God and resisted evil.

And then Job lost everything: his wealth, his children, his health. But he refused to blame God.

His friends assume that Job's suffering is his own fault, that he lost everything as a consequence of his sin. That was the conventional wisdom of the time: that bad things happened to bad people, and that we're all sinners, which we are.

But Job adamantly defends his innocence, and we know he's innocent because we know how his life came apart, yet our all-too-human tendency is to blame the victim. Despite that, Job is persistent; he knows what he knows about himself but he's beginning to wonder about God, because God won't answer Job's questions. Until today.

It may be that God is silent these days because we stopped talking to God, I mean *really* talking, the way Job did, or the way prophets such as Elijah or Ezekiel did, back in the day. We all pray, of course; we just said The Lord's Prayer together a few minutes ago. But Job is ticked off – he *knows* he's innocent and he wants answers. There is no such thing as 'the patience of Job.' He's angry and threatens to bring a *lawsuit* against God because he knows that God will be compelled to speak in open court. This book developed over the course of a few hundred years before it took its final form four hundred years before Jesus was born. Courtroom drama is in our DNA.

Rabbi Howard Cohen at Congregation Shirat Hayam in Marshfield said that, 'Often we tend to think of extraordinary events (some might say miracles) as rare. In reality,' he said, 'our lives are filled with truly remarkable, mind-boggling phenomena. We just need to be open to experiencing them.'

Then he told a simple story about Rabbi Zusya's reaction to a common biblical phrase. It goes like this:

'Once Rabbi Zusya was in a class taught by the Maggid of Mezeritch. The Maggid began the class with a commonplace verse from the Torah: "And God spoke..." Just these few words were enough to excite and astonish Rabbi Zusya. He exclaimed "God spoke... GOD spoke... God SPOKE!" over and over until he had to be removed from the classroom due to the disruption he was causing.'

In the Bible, God often spoke, though what God had to say wasn't always what people might have hoped to hear. Yet God did speak. Today, such a thing has become an astonishing anomaly. Maybe we've given up on hearing even the still, small voice.

In Job, God answered out of the whirlwind; in Mark, Jesus – Emmanuel; God with Us – rebuked the wind and stilled the sea. There is no doubt that God commands the natural world. But then, if God is in charge, why is there suffering in the world?

Whatever Job thinks about God, his friends, his wife, and his predicament, God reassures him that the world is built on a firm foundation, that its cornerstone is on solid ground, and that there are limits.

There are limits for Jesus too. Today's reading continues from last week, when Jesus told the parable about the mustard seed. Before that, he had been teaching beside the sea and a large crowd had gathered to hear him. He'd been working hard and needed a break. So now, at the end of the day, he tries to get away by boat, but the crowd – his entourage – followed in their own boats. His disciples take him *just as he was*, and we follow just as we are too.

The Sea of Galilee is known for its sudden storms, but Jesus is so tired, he is soon asleep on a cushion in the stern. Even though he is exhausted from all that has gone before, he doesn't seem worried one little bit – his *faith* gives him *peace* in the midst of chaos. His faith is unshakeable, as unshakeable as the faith of John the Baptist, who proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me' (Mark 1:7).

It was only after John's arrest that Jesus began his ministry in Galilee. And when Jesus, maybe a little perturbed at being awakened out of a deep sleep, rebuked the wind and calmed the sea, his disciples wondered, 'Who could do that?' and Jesus wondered why they were afraid. The disciples are not yet ready in their faith but we're confident that they soon will be; it's a process.

Notice that Jesus didn't say there was *nothing* to be afraid of; there's plenty to worry about, whether it's winds and waves or a late mortgage payment or a lost job. But living in faith helps us remember that God is with us; God will help us feel the bottom even when we think we're in too deep.

It turns out that God's answer to Job is no answer at all. Does the universe really operate on the principle of reward & punishment? If not, why is Job punished? With no apparent guidance from above, how do we understand the world, compared to how a chipmunk might understand the world?

I mention chipmunks because yesterday, we came home and discovered a chipmunk *in the birdfeeder*. Now, on the one hand, he had plenty to eat, but on the other hand, he couldn't get out. Is he thinking this is a good news-bad news situation? Did he think he'd be okay until the food ran out? Or did he pray for deliverance and then I showed up to let him out?

Job had the same kind of narrow world-view, and the disciples did too. They saw only what was in front of them. Job feared chaos and the disciples, the depths of the sea. The answer for both was faith, faith in God and faith that, despite appearances, the world rests on a secure foundation.

We like to think that God has a plan for us, but that's not true. God has given us a *purpose*, but there is no *plan*. As Christians, as God-worshipping people, we are called to live into our purpose. Plans can be disrupted, interrupted, corrupted. But in living into our purpose, we are assured that God is right there next to us in the boat. That is the miracle. That is the answer.

Amen.