

A Sermon from St. John's
Sunday, October 20, 2024

The Rev. Dr. Douglas Morhmann: **Wisdom for a Resilient Faith**

Texts: Job 38:1-7, 34-41; Ps 104:1-9, 25, 37; Mark 9:30-37



The book of Job has long fascinated me, not least for the passage we read this morning. I even took a college class solely dedicated to the book.

There is no easy way to summarize adequately this complicated book of 42 chapters. What can be said is that Job 38, our text, is by all measures a climax to the piece's meditation on wisdom. What we read this morning continues on, all the way through ch. 41. This, we might say, is the way of the book. Other than the faster pace of chs. 1-2 and 42, the book moves in a rather ponderous way, but this is also its genius as it rigorously explores its subject. In any event, our text does not give one much comfort and clarity, at least initially, as an answer to Job's disastrous life. You see, in ch. 2 we learn that all of Job's children have suddenly died, his wealth has likewise evaporated, his health is failing, and his wife—in her own despair—has advised Job to curse God and simply die. Considering this chain of disasters, we are immediately given the impression that this poor character's life is over. What is there to live for? This ancient tale is, in effect, what we could describe as dystopian. As wisdom literature, it is an attempt to imagine faith in God within an epic disaster. The driving force behind the book is a question such as, "Can tragedy fit within a framework of faith?" So, when God speaks, as he does in ch. 38, after essentially 35 chapters of silence, the lengthy discussions between Job and his companions are put in sharp relief, and as readers our attention is immediately arrested. We will come back to the content of God's speech momentarily.

We know a thing or two about dystopian literature, don't we?

Dystopic movies and films proliferate today, so much so, in fact, that they are becoming a standard narrative of our times. And, they are, I suspect, shaping our collective imagination. Robots with artificial intelligence, killer asteroids, cataclysmic climate change, wild viruses or fungi, genetic engineering gone wrong, mass EMPs (electromagnetic pulses), hostile alien invasions, and hosts of other threats are now regularly portrayed in our media. Using stock-in-trade prophecies, they anticipate the end of civilization as we know it.

There are so many examples of these productions. Movies such as Terminator, Mad Max, the Matrix, the Book of Eli, Hunger Games, Civil War and so many more, fall into this category. Dystopian television series of note are Revolution, Handmaid's Tale, Altered Carbon, Severance, Westworld, Silo, and many more. This genre is extensive!

Don't even get me started about zombies....

Cinematic themes with optimism and hope are now viewed—ever more—as naïve, trite, nostalgic, fit only for the Hallmark Channel, or whatever.

I like to look at this subject through two major movie series. Star trek and Star Wars. Do you have a favorite

between them? Star Wars or Star Trek? Star Wars flirts with principles of law and order, and of course with good and evil, but it thrives in a clash between two dystopias: on the one hand there is a totalitarian state which is thinly veiled by the Galactic Senate and on the other hand there is a disenfranchised, rabble resistance that perpetually teeters at the edge of oblivion. Star Trek likewise pictures a universe of struggle and conflict, but it is centered around the idea of a Federation which is built upon several optimistic principles of mutual respect, cooperation, and a hopeful future. Two starkly different views of societies; two vastly different estimations of human character.

I find both compelling, along with many of the stories just mentioned, but the topic of dystopian films and tv shows often leaves me feeling disturbed.

Why disturbed? With such a regular diet of dystopia, I often wonder what impact they might cumulatively have upon us. I don't think this is a casual or idle wondering, for these narratives are now so common that they may be *the* chief narrative of the 21st Century. It is immaterial whether the narratives are set in the past, present, or future since their characters use *our* cultural idioms. Doubtless cinematic producers cast these stories as apprehensions of our present reality. Thus, I wonder: Are they merely predicting a devolution, or are they in fact presently altering our expectations and understanding of human nature? Even more to the point for this morning, I wonder are they diminishing our expectations or imaginative capacity for faith in God?

This last question leads us back to our readings today.

I believe the book of Job paints a picture of resilient faith. The intention of the book, its very purpose, is to assail weak faith based on conventional wisdom—wisdom that would be found in Proverbs or implied in the laws of Deuteronomy—that doing good things in our lives will bring us good things in return, or conversely, doing bad things will yield an evil return. It is kind of like what many people think of as *karma*. Job's life, though, is a perfect foil to such a philosophy of life. We know, but struggle to admit, this conventional wisdom or karma doesn't really explain life. It's too simple to really work. So, the tale of Job, bids the reader, bids us, to surrender up this wisdom. Simplistic views of life and faith falter too many times—so the lessons from Job reach beyond this ancient story; it is about us as well.

Boiled down to its essence, the book is about weak faith vs. resilient faith. We all know of stories of friends or family who have faced personal disasters. You may be a first-hand witness to tragedies, tragedies first of a physical nature and also of a spiritual nature. With little reflection we know that devastating experiences stress our faith!

Friends of my family, back home in Michigan, have this Fall suffered a terrible tragedy. It's a story of a grandfather and grandson. The boy was born with defects in his liver. After many attempts to compensate for it with medicines, he endured two liver transplants. His health finally started to improve, and he was able to attend kindergarten. After his first day in school, the grandfather came over to his house to visit and help celebrate this significant milestone.

He spent some time with him. However, as he was leaving the boy's house, he accidentally ran over the child and killed him.

What grief this family must be suffering!

I've tried to imagine how I, if I were the priest to this grandfather—how I would conduct myself. How could I dare to tell him that some sin in his life had caused his grandson's death? How would I illuminate a karmic principle to explain it? How, in my so very limited wisdom, could I give perfect solace to his soul? Impossible. So, I think I would simply sit with him, sit next to and in his grief, in silence.

How can faith survive something like this?

Job's timelessness comes by its relentless examination of simplistic, mechanistic faith. The end goal is to foster robust faith. Its lead character, poor Job, is meant to be a personification of dystopia, tests both in natural and spiritual dimensions. Poor Job is drawn up as one who faces every type of tribulation, and in this way his story brings into its scope all people from all times.

But is not a true dystopia! No, this book's hero, even in the depths of his agony, exhibits trust in God. It is God's help, Job seeks, his relief from pain; Job asks God for understanding and he never gives up. Other characters, Job's wife and his companions, by contrast, flail about because of their fragility of faith; theirs is a simple, blind, and unhelpful faith. Job's faith remains stalwart, never relenting to the surrounding pressures. Job expresses his pain, without understating its brutality, in the midst of this trust. His reward is the text we read today.

God booms his reply from the heavens.

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

Who determined its measurements—surely you know!

Or who stretched the line upon it?"

And so on, through ch.41, pointing at the universe's complexity, its invisible yet intricate interconnectedness, and the infinite scope of the wisdom behind it all. Through its lofty poetry Job is coaxed, and we too if we are willing, to lift our eyes to gaze into a bewildering cosmos. These chapters remind me of Eucharistic Prayer C in our Book of Common Prayer. Prayer C includes this moment of praise:

God of all power, Ruler of the Universe, you are worthy of glory and praise. At your command all things came to be: the vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses and this fragile earth, our island home.

There is in God's booming replies a mysterious duality of beauty and grief. It is a picture of God pointing with

one hand towards the wondrousness of creation and another hand towards its ferocity. Beauty and strength, two very different pictures to evoke awe and fear. We see this in the warm and beauty of a Gulf coast beach that soothes us one day and terrifies us with a hurricane the next. Our lives, not just Job's, are all set within the paradox of God's creation. We know that each day we may walk straight into heartache or perhaps into unforeseen kindness. We know this so well because we have experienced both deep within our core. *Yet, do we truly integrate these experiences with our faith?*

God's reply does not address the emotional despair of Job and his wife. For that we may read other stories in the OT, such as the story of Ruth and Naomi or Gospel stories with Jesus and the children. The point of God's speech, however, is to elevate us in order to see God's reward for Job's resilience; it is a gift of *revelation* of the Creator God who can attend *both* to the vast cosmos *and* to his single servant, Job. This is extraordinary passage, and it may be the largest quotation of God's voice in the entire Bible. It is thus a paradoxical picture of God's transcendence which God expressed personally to Job. For God to answer at all is clearly a vindication of Job's faith and it is, in an unexpected way, consolation. C. S. Lewis, I believe, was aiming at this paradox when, in the sixth book of the Narnia series, he wrote again and again: "Aslan is not a tame lion."

The question that Job 38 presents us with this morning, is do we desire a resilient faith in God, the very architect of the universe, who *also* hears our pleas in times of pain. Do we want a resilient faith that grows stronger in presence of beauty and stands stalwart in the face of trouble? If we do, then we will know the rash of dystopian visions around us will not have the last word. We, instead, have a faith, hope, and love that will endure. *Amen.*