

Job III: Cosmic Adventure

Dan Stern October 22, 2006 P19B

Selected verses from Job 38 & 39; Matthew's "lilies of the field"

I want first to thank you - I don't do it often enough - for helping me make it a major part of my vocation each and every week to ponder the existence and nature of God. When I told my nurse practitioner brother, Mike that this week I had been perusing books about evolution and post-Darwinian concepts of God's nature, he teased me and said that he hadn't had time to think much about that, HE'D been too busy healing the sick and saving people's lives. THAT sure put me in my place! And of course it would be arrogant to think that come any Sunday morning I could have ever plumbed the depths of spiritual riches in the week prior, let alone got it all communicated well enough for your benefit in a sermon. Still, I am so grateful that I am allowed the time to dig for precious gold from scripture and from learned theologians, trying to discern what God has to say.

To paraphrase the hymn we just sang: How does THIS creature adequately say awe and grace and joy and thanks? I say, life is good. Thank you for giving me the assignment as your pastor and preacher to keep searching for and interpreting that goodness. God bless YOU and keep you forever IN that goodness too.

As some of you know, by way of contrast, I've been particularly engrossed these past several weeks attempting to grasp the meaning of undeserved suffering. I can't do it! Neither could Job, a far better man than me. I haven't suffered as he has. I've hardly ever even gotten sick, I've never been to war, I haven't suffered much at all, really; I haven't endured many of the hurts and losses that you have. So I am hardly equipped to adequately 'get' the degree of pain that many know intimately from personal experience. Like Job's not-so-helpful friends, I'm afraid I may have already fallen flat in many a sermon trying to interpret something I haven't fully understood because I haven't had first hand experience with it. Like Job, I've uttered things too wonderful for me.

Robert Alter says that "Job's dilemma is (really) that of human egotism: he has experienced, or so he feels, all too much, and now wants to experience nothing more at all, to be enveloped in the blackness of the tomb, enclosed by dark doors that will remain shut forever. In contrast to this giving up and turning out of lights, God's poetic response is a demonstration of the energizing power of panoramic vision. Instead of a death wish, it affirms the splendor and vastness of life... Carrying us from sea to sky to the unimaginable recesses where snow and wing are stored, to the lonely wastes and craggy heights where only the grass or the wildest of animals live. Each item is evoked for its own sake, each existing thing having its own intrinsic and often strange beauty. It's overall effect is to turn Job's impulse toward death into an affirmation of life."

Alas, none of us know how to address this world's seemingly random and undeserved suffering, cruelty, and violence. All of us sometimes are tempted to want to shut it all out. And yet, to at least try to be attentive to it all is, I think, THE most important thing we can do, to keep searching for the truth and the goodness beyond the suffering. Such a compulsion to experience meaning in the universe is a holy longing, itself divine and eternally imbued with God's grace.

It was at Job's own point of suicidal darkness and despair that we left him last Sunday. Pretty much all I knew how to do was to offer up the 'response' of poetry. So I quoted one of my favorite poets, Wendell Barry:

I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethoughts of grief.
I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light.
For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

And as we also absorb the beautiful poetry contained in today's verses from the Book of Job, we encounter a God who is offering up a sampling of created glories too wonderful for any of us to fully grasp. Maybe for a time we, like Job and like Wendell Barry, CAN take our rest in the grace of the world; we can just drink it all in, all the lilies of the field, the birds of the air, all the drama and color of Autumn too, with wonder and delight.

I remember once drinking in a still-water time with a friend. I was at the front end of a canoe. We were rowing around a bend in the Boundary Waters of Northern Minnesota, and suddenly saw in front of us, not 10 feet away, the lifting of the mighty head and antlers of an enormous moose. He was gigantic! My first instinct was to jump out and swim in the opposite direction. But after catching our breath, my friend and I found ourselves overtaken with awe and fascination. That moose had probably seen more of our kind than we had of his. So he remained calm.

Then too: just last month at my cabin in Illinois, in the very early morning light I noticed that just outside the cabin window I drank in the sight of a very large owl sitting at eye level on a limb, again, a mere 10 feet from me. It was staring at me, as if curious, and I stared back for the better part of an hour. Then seeing me move about a bit too much, it flew away. I think it had not been fear but fascination that had held us there so long, both owl and man intrigued by the incredible novelty of the other. These kinds of experiences restore us to the goodness of creation; we encounter wildness in its own right, not susceptible to possession or even to explanation. And that, in and of itself, is very good, very healing.

It's not just this kind of wilderness that contributes to Job's healing. Paradoxically, his very pain and affliction contribute too. His sufferings cause him to confront possibilities of being he would have otherwise ignored. And if we look at all closely at the natural world, we discover that these created glories are ever wilting and falling, always in a state of flux, continually and curiously being created anew. The process is not all neat and clean. Things do not come about in perfectly benign ways. To put it succinctly, it IS a dog eat dog world. The eagle spying its prey, living by the blood it lets, survival of the fittest. And if we who believe in God also believe in the process of evolution, and most of us here today do, then it goes without saying that we have to take into account a lot of what appears to be random, weird, cruel, and selfish. It's not that cruel competition is the ONLY thing that happens in the evolutionary process. Scientists are increasingly aware of complex genetic patterns of cooperation too. God's poetic speech to Job mentions many beautiful things that blend together well and function splendidly, but also several weird, mean, and awful things. It tells, for example, of the ostrich's wings flapping, though they

lack plumage to fly, its eggs being laid on the ground only to be trampled upon by others; its labor is often in vain. "Are these trappings of the eggs of flightless birds mere random acts of senseless violence?" (Billings MT professor of philosophy David Strong) Why DOES the lion eat the defenseless fawn? Again, that nagging question: why does God permit such suffering?

To some, the evolutionary process is rife with happenstance, incredible waste, pain and horror. And any god who would oversee this mess must be careless, indifferent, almost diabolical. But suppose for a moment that God is not JUST the originator of order, but also the disturbing wellspring of novelty. What if God is less concerned with imposing a plan or design than with providing any and all of us with an opportunity to participate in God's own creation? What if God is, and I quote, 'the unsettling source of continually new modes of being which forever elude orderly schemata?'

It is Catholic theologian John Haught who states most eloquently that BOTH sides of the debate raging over evolution and creationism are lacking the notion of novelty. Novelty, he defines in part, as the quest for beauty, and in part, simply as adventure. We are a part of a grand cosmic adventure which IS itself the God-inspired process. Haught considers this 'novelty' to be both THE necessary component of evolution AND the essence of the unfolding of divine mystery. Too bad, says he, that so many of us "become fixated on (order alone), (because) in our obsession with order we succumb to monotony and triviality. But God is complicit in just the opposite - in the novelty, in the disturbances, in the drama of instability, because without those mixed in, life is reduced to a dead sameness. I could have avoided getting startled by that big, scary moose if I'd not gone canoeing in the first place. I could have missed going eye to eye with that wise old owl if I'd slept in a little longer. But too much order and safety and sloth is just as evil as is too much danger and novelty. The identification of God only with order is a serious misunderstanding in our religion/s." It not only results in triviality. Hateful, even Fascist atrocities are committed . . . in the name of an order-only kind of god. An order-only god that includes suffering in the order of things is cruel and unworthy of worship. Instead, "God is the source of order AND of novelty. God loves too much to WANT suffering to occur, but God does not settle for mere survival either. In the world's and our own (adventurous) quest for beauty, people and things get hurt. As Rabbi Kushner, author of When Bad Things Happen to Good People puts it, "Life is not fair. The "wrong" people get sick and the "wrong" people get robbed and the wrong people get killed in wars and accidents. Some people see life's unfairness and decide, 'there is no God; the world is nothing but chaos. They see the same unfairness and ask themselves, Where do I get my sense of what is fair and unfair? Where do I get my sense of outrage and indignation? Don't I get these things from God? Our responding to life's unfairness with sympathy and with righteous indignation, God's compassion and God's anger working through us, may be the surest proof of all of God's reality." Furthermore: Darwin does religion a vital service by challenging us to recapture the tragic aspects of divine creativity.

(paraphrase) "We don't have to candy over the deviations, disorder, turmoil, and tragedy of the life story. God is still love. God is defenseless, disturbingly vulnerable love. And that's enough.

Talk about disturbing kinds of love: this week, Charles Cressey invited me to see a movie in the home of some local peace activists entitled The Ground War. I confessed to him that at first, I thought I wouldn't want to go see it. I don't like war stories. War is a despicable thing, and this

movie pulls no punches in showing and telling the truth about war. But it does so not as some political polemic, rather, it does so directly through the voices of recent front line soldiers who are no longer proud of the orders they unquestioningly obeyed. They have come back to face even more challenging battles here at home. They have emerged in civilian life as the heroes they wanted to be at war. And in spite of efforts to suppress the telling of their true stories, they are telling them anyway. I resisted coming to see what I feared would be one more depressing film about war. I came away feeling I had viewed one of the most hope-filled films I have seen in a long, long time. It was hopeful because these young former warriors are becoming our next generation of peacemakers, their wisdom born of and humbled by the awfulness of their experience. I believe that God is endlessly re-creating a sense of moral purpose out of awful stuff, out of war, out of the kind of raw material that would otherwise lead inexorably to suicidal despair. Yes, war does lead many to suicidal despair. As Heraclitus put it: 'Some die. Some go insane. Others are left embittered and with animosity toward old friends. Others. . . become heroes.'

There is certainly something to be said for direct experience, maybe even for the direct experience of horrible things. (David Strong, prof of philosophy at the UCC's Rocky Mt College in Billings, MT): God's poetic response to Job, today's text, represents the first occasion in the Book of Job in which it is implied that Job "understands God through direct (experience) rather than merely in conformity with the wisdom of the tradition" - God is still speaking, in other words! - and through direct experience of the presence of God, comes healing. Job's healing doesn't come from a God exerting control; he doesn't get from God an overwhelming display of coercive power. Instead, he hears from God a kind of creation story that is surprisingly disorderly, taking place in a wilderness where Job is NOT at the center of things at all. God's speech tells of providing prey for the raven when its young wander about for lack of food, of the bringing of rain to a land where no one lives, and how it defies our capacity as human beings to number the clouds. Things just are as they are, seemingly without reason. But at the very same moment, something unexpected is coming about. The rain falling on desolate ground makes 'the bud of the tender herb to spring forth'. The flightless ostrich represents more than the nonsense of creation, 'When it spreads its plumes aloft, it laughs at the horse and the rider.' It seems to mock our warrior ways. "Things have a dignity that call on us to behold them, 'things too wonderful' for Job, for any of us. Job's vision is essentially one of wild things quite apart from human intervention or assistance. God wills us to behold the ostriches and owls, the stars and wildflowers. In a fix-it-fast culture, wild things are seen either as so much raw material or are considered worthless. What good is it? In the careless wording of a former president, if you've seen one redwood, you've seen them all. And yet, what a paradox that this vision of things just existing in their created wildness, in their being what they are, quite apart from both being for us or being assisted by us, THIS is what finally HEALS Job! I feel that wise old owl I stared at so long had a healing effect on me too. So did getting over my fright upon seeing that enormous moose. Allowing creatures to be, and just being with them, not lording over them, is a wonderfully healing thing.

Thoreau called it the tonic of wildness. Wildness can bring us to a pause, can enable us to affirm life, to inhabit the earth in a way that is at peace with it.

So be grateful to Charles Darwin. And be grateful to God. Because in complete harmony with scientific disclosure of previously hidden aspects of nature, God is alive. God is speaking through the holy language of the very evolutionary process itself. Let yourself be drawn into the wild novelty, the dangerous, disorderly beauty, the grand adventure and mystery of God's ever-evolving, hope-filled creativity.

And in 'all things counter, strange, who knows how, praise Him'.