

Out of the Whirlwind

Who has put wisdom in the inward parts, or given understanding to the mind? Who has the wisdom to number the clouds? Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens, when the dust runs into a mass and the clods cling together?

On February 2nd we will begin a study of the book of Job. Job casts a vision of a world overshadowed by pain and suffering. God responds to Job by showing him the beauty and hope of the same world. Bent and broken Job demands an answer from God for his suffering.

Job has put God on trial and says:

"Today also my complaint is bitter;
his hand is heavy despite my groaning.
Oh, that I knew where I might find him,
that I might come even to his dwelling!
I would lay my case before him,
and fill my mouth with arguments."

Job has indicted God for crimes against humanity through divine indifference. In response, God speaks to him out of the whirlwind of a world and cosmos so vast, beautiful and wild that it takes Job's breath away.

In the quote above we get a small taste of the beauty in God's response to Job. It seem at first glance to be an incredibly odd and bewildering response to Job's searing inquisition of God and to his painful suffering.

After all, his children have been killed, his body afflicted with leprosy and boils, and he has become an impoverished beggar. Job looks around the world and sees it as a dangerous place, full of hard, sharp edges that cut at both the body and the soul.

The world has become a place of hopelessness and all Job can see is its ugliness and suffering. After the wounds of his loss and grief, it is understandable. In fact, Job's anger is a deep, primal form of faith. Imagine the kind of faith it takes to trust God enough to condemn God.

In essence, Job is asking where in the world God has gone as he looks around at the suffering. Job demands to know why has God so forsaken humanity.

Job's friends attempt to shush what they perceive as his blasphemy in the raw honesty of his suffering, but God doesn't condemn Job. Rather, God condemns Job's friends. Job's reputation of being righteous and blameless continues not in spite of his doubt and questioning of God but because of it.

Job's is a story of immeasurable tragedy and suffering, yet his story gives us some of the most extraordinary and beautiful poetry in all of Scripture.

Raw suffering juxtaposed with wild beauty. This is the human story. God invites us into this new understanding that like suffering, beauty cannot really be explained.

Like suffering, beauty can only really be experienced. And like suffering, beauty changes us. Both are a constant in our world. Suffering and beauty encircle our lives in a constant testament that freedom from paralyzing despair comes through embracing paradox.

The longer I live the more I believe that life as suffering and life as beauty are *both* true. I don't think the one negates the other. God does not respond with beauty to cancel out or disregard Job's suffering.

Nor does this mean that unnecessary suffering caused by human indifference or bad-acting are inevitable—God constantly calls us to act against unnecessary or inflicted suffering as Jesus' while life demonstrates.

But God doesn't answer Job directly because no answer — not even one from God — is ever satisfactory in the midst of our pain and grief.^[1]

Nothing solves some forms of suffering. Nothing answers it. But neither is suffering and grief the whole story of our lives and of the world. There is beauty, and grace, and hope in the world, too, existing simultaneously, in paradox, side-by-side.

Just as Job is pleading with God to look at the world and bear witness to its suffering and pain, God is pleading with Job to look at the world and bear witness to its beauty and glory. God needs to see Job's prophetic grief. Job needs to see God's prophetic beauty.

Both are incomplete without the other. Job is trying desperately to draw God's eyes to the plight of humanity, and God is trying desperately to draw Job's eyes beyond humanity and suffering and to the larger world around us.

^[1] David R Hinson, *Patheos*, August 2014.

Humanity needs the transcendent divine, and the transcendent divine needs the gritty realities of humanity.

That's the change we see in the book of Job in the end.
God and Job finally see each other, eye to eye.
At the beginning Job and God are far removed from one another.

But by the time the book ends, things have changed; the divine courtroom, where God and Satan wagered, has been replaced by an earthly one where Job and God argue.

God is no longer above humanity, but alongside, so much so that Job can say, "Before I had only heard about God. Now I have seen God."

I believe this is our deep challenge in the age of the 24-hour news cycle and the proliferation of fake news---we have begun substituting real experience and relationships for a barrage of ugliness that may or may not be true. We need to turn that noise off and get out in our communities and learn to cultivate a real awareness of human suffering and to cultivate an awareness of beauty in the world.

The place where these two meets is precisely the place where we will also find Jesus. Jesus is the perfect expression of God's exquisite glory experiencing the full depth of human suffering; he is the perfect union of suffering and beauty and in him we meet God and we meet one another.

Grace and Peace, Stephanie+