

Job 38:1-7 The Sound of God's Words

There is an old James Taylor song out of the 1970's entitled, "Something in the Way She Moves," in which he sings, about a woman,

"It isn't what she's got to say or how she thinks or where she's been. To me, the words are nice the way they sound. I like to hear them best that way, it doesn't matter much what they mean. She says them mostly just to calm me down."

Sometimes I think we are prone to be annoyed by people talking too much, it all becomes noise. But imagine a world where people did not speak to one another at all (not just men and women, but anyone, teachers to students, doctors to patients, friend to friend, etc.). The silence would be intolerable.

If that were the case it would be understandable, this idea that the mere sound of someone speaking might have a calming affect, no matter what they said, or what their words meant, just to hear the sound of someone's voice.

It is, perhaps, relatable anyway, if one is lonely or afraid, or lost, how powerful it can be when someone says something, reaches out with words, acknowledges one's presence. In some ways, if one is not spoken too, they do not exist; it is as if they are not

there. In the same way, if one does not speak, they may as well not be there.

Job

Whatever else one might say about the literary presentation of God in the Book of Job, one must admit that throughout the larger part of the book, God is silent. Job speaks, Job's comforters speak, even Job's wife speaks, and I'm guessing it mattered to him what her words meant and I am not sure she had a calming affect on him; but right up until the very end, God is silent.

Theodicy

The issue is, of course, the age old question of Theodicy, a defense for God for having created a world in which people suffer and die. "Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward," says Eliphaz the Temanite, and the trouble that people are born to is not mild but unfathomable and intolerable.

We have created words like genocide and holocaust to describe the absurd insanity of the extreme extent of either our own experience, or the experience of others that is made known to us..

Why *do* bad things happen to good people?

We speak of man's inhumanity to Man (that is the old patriarchal way of speaking about the irony of human inhumanity, by which we are all always threatened).

We say, "Is there no justice?" Or just ask, "Why?"

We speak of the problem of evil, of pain, of death itself. The name for the whole discussion is "Theodicy."

Back to Job

One is familiar with the story of Job, who was a prosperous and highly-regarded person who played by the rules and had been rewarded with affluence and a large family and the respect and admiration of his neighbors. Of course, he was a person of faith.

Then, as a test, to see if his faith was genuine, and if it would remain in troubled times, his whole world fell apart. He lost his fortune and everyone died. His life was spared but not his health. Friends came to "comfort" him. Mainly they told him there must be some secret sin in his life, otherwise his punishment would be unjust. He claimed there was no such sin.

Back to Theodicy

We all suffer the same experience - most of our lives are filled with good things and we have plenty, and there are friends and family and beauty all around.

There is an uneven suffering, not connected to merit, that we all face.

Everyone sins, everyone dies, but some seem to have it worse than others, some better. Chain smokers live to be 90 while 6-year-olds get cancer. We offer words of comfort and explanation to one another, sometimes more successfully than other times. But what we really desire is an answer from God that will satisfy all our questions.

Of all the objections to faith that people offer;

- 1 - that it is not rational, against science and reason
- 2 - that the faithful are all hypocrites

The problem of pain and suffering is the most powerful objection. Very often we find, like the words of Job's friends, our own words fail to satisfy. All efforts at theodicy fail us. The experience of many is the same as Job's, crying out, asking God for an answer, only to hear silence. For the first 37 chapters, God is silent.

The Sound of God's Words

One may get the impression, as I have, that in this text, when God finally answers, that it is the sound of the words that matters most, not primarily their meaning.

God has spoken at last
God *is* really out there after all

We are not abandoned

We are not alone calling out for answers to life's most perplexing and bewildering questions in a universe where our words drift out into space to fade like a mist into a vast emptiness.

Just the fact that God finally speaks calms us down because it means that God is, that there *is* someone to help after all. For a time at least, it doesn't matter much what the words mean. The sound of them is enough.

The Words

The words happen to be, "Who is this that darkness my counsel with words without knowledge?" It is God asking us a question, asking us what all the fuss is about. And these are gracious words just because there are at last words.

"Brace yourself like a man. I will question *you*, and *you* will answer me." The sense is that, now that God is speaking, Job and his friends are happy to be silent, and to be questioned. It will turn out that way anyhow, whenever we question God, sooner or later, God will question us.

It all starts out with a grand review of creation, the reality of life itself. "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" It goes on for the next four

chapters, which are worth the read sometime when you get the chance.

But the the point is that the sound of God's words not only have meaning on their own terms, they represent the presence of a person. It is God, practicing the ministry of Presence.

Like the woman in the James Taylor song, God is able to calm us because he is *present to us*, has come into our lives and into the life of this world, with grace and peace and truth.

I find it difficult to explain, let Frederick Buechner help, he uses the concept of a whirlwind to describe Job's troubles,

"It is out of the whirlwind that Job first hears God say, 'who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge?' It is out of the absence of God that God makes himself present, and it is not just the whirlwind that stands for his absence, not just the storm and chaos of this world that knocks into a cocked hat all human attempts to find God in the world, but God is absent from all Job's words about God, and from the words of his comforters, because they are words without knowledge that obscure the issue of God by trying to define him as present in ways and places that he is not present, to define him as moral order, as the best answer a man can give to the problem of his life. God is not an answer man can give, God says, and

God himself does not give answers. God gives himself, and into the midst of the whirlwind of his absence gives himself.”

And that is also the meaning of Jesus, for Jesus is God giving himself to us. Jesus is God speaking at last. And in that giving the questions are all silenced, the storm is stilled. Like Job we know that we have been bested by our superior, but not destroyed, and most importantly our faith is not destroyed, rather it is established.

And our lives are not taken away but restored to us even as Job’s life was restored to him because in the end he was given more than he ever had before.

God is here now nothing else matters much.

Do you believe that?

It is a grand gift that we have been given, life and love, and God’s undeserved acceptance.

Have faith, take heart! The power that brought life where there was no life is the power that sustains and nourishes us.

Like Job, we have spoken of things we did not understand, things so wonderful to know; may we repent and believe, and give praise to God

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