

Windy Wisdom

Job 38

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Intro to Scripture

Good morning First Parish friends! I am coming to you today from my student residence on the Atlantic School of Theology campus in Halifax, Nova Scotia. We arrived here in June, and spent our mandated two-week quarantine settling in before James started work at the local shipyard and I began summer classes. The last class I took this summer was one on the “Wisdom Books” of the Bible, which include Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. They’re books that I’d never really considered to be the most exciting parts of the Bible; they’re light on narrative storytelling, and heavy on angst. But I’ve come around on them a bit. I have a new appreciation for the ways these books seem to be in conversation with each other.

You have the book of Proverbs, which represent a collection very conventional, logical, wisdom. The sayings in Proverbs largely reflect the idea that, theoretically, righteousness, wisdom, and hard work will be materially rewarded, while wickedness and sloth lead to ruin. It’s logic that holds up... except when it doesn’t. We’ve all seen bad things happen to good, intelligent, hard-working people. And, many of us had good things happen to us that we didn’t entirely earn. That’s what the whole conversation around “privilege” is about, right? The reality that many of us are shown a little more grace than others based on nothing more than the color of our skin, our gender presentation, our subtle signifiers of education or class. And that, for others, it takes a lot more wisdom, righteousness, and hard work to climb up to that same rung on the ladder that some folks are just born at.

So, while the theoretical wisdom of Proverbs is certainly good life advice, it is somewhat... incomplete. So, our Biblical canon also gives a story, really, a long-form poem, about the lived experience of unjust suffering: this is the Book of Job. Job was a wise and righteous man who suffered traumatic losses that he did not deserve. Much of Job’s story is taken up with his cries of lament, his exhaustive efforts begging God to tell him *why* he, in his innocence, has suffered so greatly. And Job uses some pretty pointed language. He is very angry, and doesn’t hold back in his bitterness. He says things like, “God has undone me... I scream ‘Outrage!’ and I am not answered, I shout and there is no justice.” But God remains silent through most of the book... *until* the very end, when God appears “out of the whirlwind” to answer Job. Here is what God has to say:

Job 38 (selections)

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:

‘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?
On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone
when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

‘Or who shut in the sea with doors
when it burst out from the womb?—
when I made the clouds its garment,
and thick darkness its swaddling band,
and prescribed bounds for it,
and set bars and doors,
and said, “Thus far shall you come, and no farther,
and here shall your proud waves be stopped”?

‘Have you commanded the morning since your days began,
and caused the dawn to know its place,
so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth,
and the wicked be shaken out of it?

It is changed like clay under the seal,
and it is dyed like a garment.
Light is withheld from the wicked,
and their uplifted arm is broken.

‘Have you entered into the springs of the sea,

or walked in the recesses of the deep?
Have the gates of death been revealed to you,

or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?
Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?

‘Where is the way to the dwelling of light,
and where is the place of darkness,
that you may take it to its territory
and that you may discern the paths to its home?

What is the way to the place where the light is distributed,
or where the east wind is scattered upon the earth?

‘Who has cut a channel for the torrents of rain,
and a way for the thunderbolt,
to bring rain on a land where no one lives,
on the desert, which is empty of human life,
to satisfy the waste and desolate land,
and to make the ground put forth grass?

Sermon

It's that time of year when we've all been having back to school dreams, right? I can't be the only one. Every year, at that first slightly dry, crisp breeze, come dreams of missed busses, slept-through exams, and new marching band drill I forgot to memorize. But that back-to-school feeling is different this year. For those among us still involved in educating or being educated through some kind of institution, we're not really sure how this fall is going to work out. But, we know that it is important for us as a society to continue imparting wisdom and instruction, in both traditional and adaptive ways.

I recently moved my entire family away from our home in Maine, with the somewhat single-minded goal of seeking wisdom—wisdom of the more classical and arguably theoretical sort. We came here, and have taken up residence in this little house *on* the seminary campus. I literally could not be better positioned to access wisdom of the traditionally bookish sort. Here, let me show you.

(I'm going to take a little walk, so if this makes you dizzy feel free to minimize your screen!). I can walk out my front door and within a dozen or so steps literally walk into a... theology library. Well, I could... if it were open. But of course, right now, like so many things, it is closed to help keep everyone safe. It aches a little to be so close to this glorious collection of wisdom... so close.... yet so far.

And my other favorite source of wisdom, church, is only just there—that's the Saint Columba Chapel, named for the early abbot of the Iona community in Scotland. But this building, too is closed.

Sometimes I think about how I went from having the keys to our glorious church building in Brunswick, a stunningly historic and serene place I could wander over to anytime, whenever I wanted, to read or sing or just sit in and feel tiny beneath those soaring arches. I'd listen to the wind sweep around the building, whistling and creaking in a way that could be a little unsettling, but also a little exciting in the way it could call to mind the history of the space.

Anyway, none of that is available to me, or any of us, right now. With no library, no FPC, and no St. Columba Chapel, none of my comfort-wisdom-sources, I'm sort of pushed out here. We are all being pushed in new directions, even as we find ourselves sitting still a little more than usual. We're still seeking new wisdom to make sense of this world in which we're living. Our conventional wisdom—get out, exercise, support your local economy, limit your screen time, be social-- all that's sort of shifted.

And it's a kind of reckoning with that tension between conventional wisdom and lived experience that the book of Job wrestles with. All those snippets of wisdom in the book of Proverbs like

“Good judgment wins favor, but the way of the unfaithful leads to their destruction”

“The work of one’s hands brings them reward.”

All those proverbs all make perfect sense, and in many ways they work. It’s a book chock-full of good advice. But what happens when living righteously and working hard isn’t enough to save you or the people you love? What happens when you’re up against a problem or a system that’s just too big, and no amount of wisdom or righteousness or work ethic on your part alone will be enough to guarantee safety or justice?

There isn’t a proverb for that. There’s only a poem, some really angsty language that gives *us* permission to hurl our rage or grief or loneliness at God when that’s what our deepest being is calling us to do. One of the great take-home lessons of Job is that there is *nothing* we can say that will turn God’s face from us.

And, it was only after Job’s epic airing of grievances that God showed up to respond. But God doesn’t give Job the kind of answer he was looking for. I think God knew there was no answer that would make Job feel better. God doesn’t say, “Don’t worry, I have a plan for you.” God doesn’t say, “I won’t give you more than you can handle.” God doesn’t even tell him *why* this happened. Not even God can reason away grief. Job had to live *through* those stages, feel his feelings, and go through the process of finding the words to name them and then give them voice.

Only then was Job ready for God’s reply. And this reply is, unapologetically, a non-answer to Job’s questions. It initially struck me as the sort of re-direct you give your kids when they ask you the same question over and over. But when I dug a little more deeply into the imagery in God’s speech, I noticed that underneath all the “I am God and you are not” language there is this majestic visual tour of the mysteries of creation. It’s almost like Job is being taken on a pilgrimage, without even leaving his home. Sounds kinda nice right now, doesn’t it?

This narrative turn to the outdoors stands in stark contrast to the more interior focus of most of the book. It’s a turn that, as a reader, I was a little skeptical of, until I realized that it was a strategy that I have also applied in times of grief. I remember waking up one day with this profound craving for *mountains*. Not to go hiking *on* our climb *up*. What I wanted to do was go and be at the bottom. Stand in between tall, rocky snow-capped peaks and just feel... *tiny*. I wanted to be nestled, cradled in and among great majestic mysteries beyond my understanding. I needed that geologic evidence that put my own concept of space and scope and time into some kind of tangible perspective.

And I realize that this is hardly an original idea—going to the wilderness to process grief. It’s precisely the premise of Cheryl Strayed’s memoir, *Wild*, which I did not read or see, but it was referenced in the *Gilmore Girls* reboot which I did. This idea is also one that has driven many a pilgrimage, like Martin Sheen’s character in the movie *The Way*. So maybe God’s idea to take Job on a whirlwind poetic tour of creation wasn’t as much of a dodge as I initially thought.

And, in these days of devastating wildfires, hurricanes descending upon coastal and inland parts of the country, and rising temperatures wreaking havoc on poorer neighborhoods, maybe there's a new way to read this call to pay attention to creation. It's interesting how God's words to a man in personal crisis take on a different meaning when heard in the midst of a global ecological crisis. Because right now, we are the ones with the power to prevent a profound experience undeserved suffering for the generations to come.

There's one more place I want to show you. This summer, I've been spending a lot of time out here with my own little future generation. When we first arrived here on campus, we were mandated to spend two weeks in quarantine; we could come outside, but we couldn't leave the property. And Canada doesn't mess around—we would get phone calls from the federal, provincial, and municipal governments checking up on us to make sure we were staying home (as we should). We also didn't have an internet connection at that time, or Canadian data plans yet. So we were quite isolated, and going pretty stir crazy.

So, to stay at least a little bit sane, we started coming out here, all the time. This spot became my church, my library, my dining room, my gym, and occasionally my office. The kids would climb all over the rocks along the shore and ask millions of questions, most of which I didn't know the answers to. And without the internet, we couldn't even look them up. It hasn't been easy, but I will say that there was something to just being out here and considering all those questions together that helped me see things differently than I would have if we'd had all the answers within easy reach, at the tap of a device.

This experience was just another way in which the pandemic has re-oriented my approach to seeking wisdom. So much has changed for me lately as a student and a church-goer and parent and daughter and friend. Unlike Cheryl Strayed or Martin Sheen or Lorelai Gilmore, I can't cross a continent or an ocean to go on a far-off pilgrimage to wrestle with what all this means. I'm guessing you can't either. Like Job, we're all somewhat limited to our immediate surroundings, listening for sparklets of wisdom in whatever proverbial whirlwind appears on any given day.

So the question I would leave us with today is this: In these times, when so much of our normal routine is closed to us, what new sources of wisdom have you found yourself turning to—sources that you might not even have considered "wisdom" six months ago? And what are they teaching you?