

## HOW BIG IS YOUR GOD?

*A sermon preached by the Rector, the Reverend Terence L. Elsberry, at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, Bedford, New York, on October 18, 2009, the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 24).*

### I

Sometimes it's hard to believe in God.

Last summer dear friends of ours lost their oldest child, a daughter. She was a beauty, a charmer and very talented. Just out of college, launched on a career she'd dreamed of since childhood, she was killed in a freak, one-car accident. Where was God that night?

Then there's the greater world out there—a world fraught with pain, suffering, starvation, unimaginable acts of cruelty. And where is God?

Or consider the terrifying prospect of nuclear bombs in the hands of enemies bent on the destruction of all we hold dear. Or look at the ways in which our culture seems to be unraveling around us. I could go on, of course, but the question is clear, and it's a burning question for many: if God is a god of power and love how can He let these awful things happen?

### II

Our Old Testament reading this morning is from the Book of Job. The life story of Job asks the same question many of us have had and will have again: how can God let such awful things happen?

Job was a God-fearing man. Yet calamity after calamity struck him. Job was so devastated by disaster that finally he rose up in defiance.

He demands justice. He confronts God: "What is the Almighty, that we should serve him? And what profits do we get if we pray to him?"

Despite his chronicle of miseries, Job remains sufficiently robust to question God.

And God answers Him. God puts in perspective the differences between Himself, the Almighty, and a mere man.

That's where our reading begins:

"The Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: 'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question YOU (Job), and you shall declare to me. 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? Can YOU lift up your voice to the

clouds, so that a flood of waters may cover you? Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go and say to you, Here we are? 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? Can YOU hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions, when they crouch in their dens, or lie in wait in their covert?"

So does Psalm 104, appointed for today, continue this theme of God's greatness, His majesty and glory:

"Bless the Lord, O my soul; O Lord my God, how excellent is your greatness! You are clothed with majesty and splendor.

"You wrap yourself with light as with a cloak, and spread out the heavens like a curtain."

That's the Lord you and I serve. That's the Lord we worship here at St. Matthew's Sunday after Sunday, and every time we gather in His Name: this holy and all-powerful God who has created the universe, who holds the creation in His hand. When Susan or Danny or I stand at this holy table at communion, we are here to lead us all in offering up to this sovereign God our selves, our lives, our gifts for His purpose and for His glory.

God continues in His recitation of His mighty powers and His mighty acts. Finally, Job lays down his defiance. He stops trying to justify himself. He tells the Lord:

"I know you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted . . . I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. . . I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you, therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

Because Job has had this remarkable one-to-one interaction with the Lord, he gives up. God is too awesome, too mighty, too powerful, too far beyond Job's frail ability to comprehend.

Before this moment, Job had a childish understanding of God. Once he actually spent time in the radiant, glory-etched presence of God, his understanding of God grew. It expanded and matured.

Sometimes it's hard being a Christian—not only when disaster strikes us or someone we love. It's also sometimes hard being a Christian when confronted by unbelievers, when non-Christians see horrible things and say, "Where was your God THEN? How did your God let *that* ghastly thing happen?"

You'd be surprised how often I find myself in the awkward position of defending God. Yet God doesn't need my defending. God, as He's pointing out to Job here, is God. And He never promised this life would be easy. Jesus Himself said, "In this world you will have tribulation." In other words, even His most faithful followers should expect trouble and learn how to cope with disaster. Jesus didn't leave us a hot house to live in; He left us the world. Adam and Eve had the hot house, and they crashed out of it. You and I live Between the Times, as the Bible tells us, between the perfection of Eden and the perfection promised us in the end when Jesus returns and reigns at last. Then love and justice will prevail. Then there will be no

more suffering and no more pain and no more injustice, because God will reign on earth as he reigns now in heaven.

**So what we need is not a little faith that says if I'm a good person and do all the right things, then God will be good to me and nothing bad will ever happen. What we need is a much larger faith based on an understanding of God and built on a relationship with God which enables us to overcome whatever life throws our way. And in the bigness of faith like that, we realize the smallness of our own powers and efforts when compared with the immensity of God's powers and His willingness to bring us through disaster and tribulation to a better place.**

That's why the Bible uses trees as a metaphor for faithful men and women of God. It takes sturdiness to endure the changeable weather of life.

My great-great grandparents were pioneers. They left this state and traversed the wilds of mid-nineteenth century America to settle in Iowa. My grandparents lived on the original farm, homesteaded by my ancestors in the 1850s. My great-great grandfather built the house, the barns, the outbuildings, cleared the land, fenced the fields and pastures. And he planted trees. Directly in front of the old farm house where I spent so much time as a boy growing up, he planted an elegant row of oaks. A hundred years later, when I was a boy, those oaks flourished—tall, strong, deeply rooted in the black Iowa soil. And what those trees had endured in those 100 years. Howling blizzards when 40 and 50-mile-an-hour winds dumped 15 to 20 inches of snow in a single day, resulting in drifts six and seven feet high; sometimes floods and sometimes (especially in the 1930s) horrible droughts when the fields lay fallow and cracks in the soil cut sometimes two feet deep; temperatures that could range from 40 below zero in winter to a hundred degrees in summer. Yet those oaks endured, and they thrived and they prospered. Why? Because their roots grew deep into the marvelously rich, fecund Iowa earth. Those trees were rooted. They were grounded. They were anchored. That's why they endured—why they still endure.

When Job had time alone with God, he gained a whole new understanding. God is the beginning and the end, the omnipotent, omniscient creator. Yet at the same time, God cares so deeply and so personally for Job that He has come down from His throne of glory and majesty to spend one-on-one time with Job. And not only spend time, God has been willing to listen to Job's complaints and criticisms. God has in His long discourse—most of which we don't have here in our scripture insert—actually shared with Job the burden of responsibility the Lord feels for managing the universe. How remarkable is that! Only a God who cares deeply and profoundly for the people He created would do such a thing, would make Himself so vulnerable.

Job's picture of God has changed. His understanding of who God is has been radically expanded. The faith he once built his life on has exploded beneath him, replaced now by a firmer foundation. Before, Job knew **about** God. After today, he **knows God**. Now Job, like the oak, can put the roots of his life and faith in the earth of this knowledge. He can anchor Himself—not to descriptions of God. He can anchor Himself to God.

**The problem many of us have when we question God, when we blame Him for the disasters and heart ache and frustrations of life is that our concept of God is not big enough to fit the reality of life. If we think because we pray and live a good life, we will be somehow immune from trouble, our idea of God is too small. If we blame God for tragedy when evil is alive in this world—personalize evil with a name, Satan or the devil, evil is evil by any name, and it's real; if we blame God for tragedy when human beings possess free will—free will which results in the contamination of our water and food and air to cause disease; free will which issues in human error, human frailty and human carelessness to cause senseless accidents; free will which causes men and women to sin boldly and proficiently in their savaging of other people, we are missing the truth. Which is WE CAN NOT HOLD GOD RESPONSIBLE FOR BAD THINGS.**

If we are ever to stop blaming God, we must come to understand Him and Who He is. We can't depend on someone else's understanding; we have to meet Him ourselves. We must take the time, make the effort required—even if like Job we come in hurt, anger and defiance—to know Him.

That's what Job did: he met God and came to know Him. He started by defiantly questioning the Lord. But when he found himself in the presence of God's creative love, Job surrendered his pride of doing the right thing, he forsook his anger at a God who could allow him to suffer. Job knelt before the Lord, and from a heart and mind transfigured by the revelation of the living God, he said: "Lord, I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

### III

When we experience God face to face, there is nothing left for us to do but kneel in humble adoration, nothing for us to do but surrender our will and our life to Him.

But we kneel not just before the God who spoke the creation into being and who holds it together by the power of His majesty. No, we also kneel before God's own focusing of Himself into a human being who suffered as we suffer, who struggled as we struggle, who wondered as we wonder at the perplexities of human experience.

See these last words of the lessons we've been given for today. Here is Jesus, and He's speaking of Himself, of His ministry, and He says: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

The highest made Himself the lowest—for you and for me. The day He died, He died with you and me in His heart and in His mind.

Only a very big God would, or could, do such a thing.