

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Lib McGregor Simmons**  
**Job 38 (selected verses)**  
**“It’s Not (All) About You!”**  
**21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**October 18, 2015**

Job is not an historical figure. He is Everyman or Everywoman who has asked questions like “Why is there evil in the world? Why would a good and righteous God permit people to suffer?”

These are the questions which Job asks across the span of 37 long biblical chapters.

In chapter 38, God responds not by giving Job a direct answer, but by taking him on a grand tour of nature’s wonder and mystery.

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Franciscan writer Richard Rohr is reported to have said that humankind’s most basic theological problem is that God is God and we are not. (1)

The notion that God is God and we are not is hard for human beings to grasp.

Witness human beings’ obsession with “selfies,” for example.

We can’t help putting ourselves at the center of the picture, it seems. We run into an old friend or a minor celebrity at the airport. Click! Our team wins the football game. Click!

Did you hear about the Christmas ad campaign of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn? Even they got in on the “selfie” act, launching an ad campaign last Christmas season which featured a young woman taking a selfie of herself with Jesus smiling in the background and the tag line, “It’s never just a selfie.”

It is an entirely human thing to put ourselves at the center of the picture. We view life from where we are standing. Right here. Right now. We view life from the vantage point of being the centers of our own universes.

What is true for us was especially true for Job because Job was in pain. Extreme pain.

Have you ever noticed how being in pain can exaggerate our human tendency toward egocentricity?

I’ve spent the past week battling a pesky cold. It wasn’t even that bad, as far as colds go. But it sure brought out my egocentric side. Every decision I made was centered around myself and my little cold. Should I come to work and spread my germs or should I stay home and risk being thought a slacker? Should I lie down and try to sleep amid coughing jags or should I sit up and drink some hot tea amid coughing jags?

Job had a lot more than a cold. He had good reason to be putting himself at the center of things.

Here are the basics of Job’s story.

At the opening of the story, Job is a man who is most blessed. Happy family. Rich. Lots of livestock. Servants.

But what should happen but that Satan who is at the heavenly poker table with God places a bet that if something should happen to Job’s nice, happy family and all his livestock to boot, he would end up cursing God. God says, “No way,” and Satan says, “Yes, way,” and how else will the bet be won or lost except by God permitting Satan to have his hand at a throw down with Job?

And so it goes.

Job loses his oxen teams to raiding bandits. His livestock and his servants are wiped out in a freak storm. His house is swept off its foundation too, killing every last one of Job’s children. And then, Job gets sick. Real sick. Covered with painful, pus-y, oozing boils from head to toe.

Job’s wife says, “Things can’t get any worse. Go ahead and get it over with. Curse God and die.”

And then Job’s friends, the epitome of “with friends like this, who needs enemies,” show up. Readers get the sense that they want to comfort Job, but they just can’t keep themselves from speculating about what Job has done or not done to deserve this terrible mess.

Job, sitting in sackcloth and ashes, is a man to be pitied.

The agony, the questions, the anger tumble out of his mouth.

“Why is this happening to me? I do not get it!”

Now, let us step back from the story for a moment and take note, there is no judgment directed toward Job for expressing his agony, for questioning God, for expressing anger toward the Almighty. Indeed, the story of Job gives

readers like us a gift for we can read in this story an acknowledgment that anger and questions expressed to God in the face of suffering are natural and therefore not to be feared, not to be tamped down. It is not wrong to ask God, Why? Why? Why? It is what we do when we hurt.

Finally, in chapter 38, God speaks.

For the next four chapters, God essentially does all the talking. God directs Job's attention to the dimensions of outer space, to the depths of the oceans, to the power of thunderstorms, to the beauty of the stars.

It is a strange response on the part of God, and yet the mysteriously powerful effect of God's response is that the human experience of evil and suffering in the world is reframed. (2)

God does not deny that there may be questions to be asked. God does not sweep Job's questions under the rug. But what God does beyond this is to cast Job's experience of suffering out into the larger arena of the entire creation where God is God and we are not. God's time line does not begin and end with Job or with us. Job mattered to God and we matter to God, but neither Job nor we are all that matter.

In an essay on Job 38, Barbara Brown Taylor references Belden Lane's wonderful book entitled *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*. Early on in his book in which he explores desert and mountain spirituality, Belden Lane includes a startling quote, "We are saved in the end by the things that ignore us."

Barbara Brown Taylor confesses, "Focused as I am on the compassion of Jesus—who did anything but ignore us—I could not imagine how that could be true, but as I read on I began to see what Lane meant.

When I look up at the night sky and try to imagine what cosmologists tell me is true—that if there is an edge to that expanse at all, then it is so far away that light from the frontier takes twice the age of the earth to reach our telescopes—when I...try to wrap my mind about that, then two fairly major things happen." (3)

The first of those things is that our egos undergo radical shrinkage. Do not most of us spend a great deal of time and energy justifying our existence on the planet? We make our lists and check them off. We work hard for grades, for raises, for success. But what do the interminable night sky and the vast oceans care? "You think that you are the center of the universe. Well, take a look at this," they silently say to us. We may know the names of the stars, but they don't know our names. They ignore us.

The second thing that happens, the second realization which grows out of the first, is that this revelation proves deeply reassuring to Job and just so, can be deeply reassuring for us as well.

Thank God the stars of the sky and deeps of the ocean ignore us. Can you imagine how awful it would be, Barbara Brown Taylor asks, "if you got into a rage one night and knocked nine or ten stars out of the sky with your wrath? Or if you walked out into your back yard for a good cry and toppled your favorite shade tree with your grief? Some of us dream of being that powerful, but it is a great mercy that such dreams do not come true.

When Job wants to know why things have gone so badly for him, God shows him a creation that goes on with or without him...By focusing Job's attention on the majesty of the things that ignore him, God offers Job some relief from the egocentricity of his pain." (4)

After God has finished the grand tour of nature's mystery and wonder which goes for four chapters, Job finally speaks again in chapter 42. He says to God, "I know that you can do all things and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted...I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, and now my eye sees you." Job has been saved. His salvation has come by seeing that God is God and human beings are not. Having caught a glimpse of the big picture, Job's trust in God has been restored.

May it be so for you, my brothers and sisters, may it be so.

1. Quoted by Barbara Brown Taylor, "On Not Being God," *Review and Expositor*, 99, Fall 2002, 609.
2. Scott Hoezee, Proper 24B, Center for Excellence in Preaching, October 12, 2015.
3. Brown Taylor, 613.
4. *Ibid.*