

Wow!

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Job 38: 1-11, Revelation 22: 1-5

There are parts of the Bible that make us think, parts of the Bible that inspire us to act, parts that give us hope, and parts like the Book of Job that simply blow us away. Job is a wronged innocent who had suffered catastrophic losses: his possessions, his family, his own health. Job confronts God with the unfairness of it all. Why me? What have I done to deserve this? By the end of the book we know that Job is right, no way does he deserve all this suffering. In his complaints, Job is not a stranger to us. We can all identify with him. We've all raised the age old question, Why me, Lord?

Job seeks a confrontation with God. He demands an answer. As they say, be careful what you ask for. God speaks to him out of the whirlwind. We heard the beginning of this answer in our first scripture lesson. There is more, much more. I'll read some of it so you can hear the power and wonder of the language, and get a feel for how the images ebb and flow.

Do you give the horse its might?
Do you clothe its neck with mane?
Do you make it leap like the locust?
Its majestic snorting is terrible.
It paws violently, exults mightily;
it goes out to meet the weapons.
It laughs at fear, and is not dismayed;
It does not turn back from the sword.
Upon it rattle the quiver,
the flashing spear, and the javelin.
With fierceness and rage it swallows the ground;
it cannot stand still at the call of the trumpet.
When the trumpet sounds, it says 'Aha!'
From a distance it smells the battle,
the thunder of the captains, and the shouting.
Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars,
and spreads its wings toward the south?
Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up
and makes its nest on high?
It lives on the rock and makes its home

in the fastness of the rocky crag.
From there it spies the prey;
Its eyes see it from far.

Amazing! Great stuff – but why is God telling Job all this? How does it answer his demand for justice? It doesn't. Instead of giving an answer God offers Job an experience, inviting him into the full wonder of creation. In image after image, God shows him how vast, strange, and diverse life really is. It's a rollicking carnival, and Job himself is part of it.

In so doing, God offers Job a kind of freedom, freedom from himself. God shifts Job's attention outward to see the wonders, to hear the hoofbeats, to come alive to the immensity of all there is. It's a carnival that does not answer the question, but changes the questioner. I think it's designed to move Job from "Why me?" to "Oh, wow!" to liberate him from his self absorption, to show him that there is creation beyond anything he could have dreamed.

We want to know what happens next; what Job does after his encounter with God. The Book of Job is silent about what next, but there is the suggestion of an answer in some drawings that William Blake made to illustrate his version of the Book of Job. A drawing from the beginning of the book, while life is still good for Job, shows him and his happy family looking at a beautiful tree decorated with musical instruments. At the end of the book, there is a parallel drawing, except in this one, Job and his new family have taken down the instruments and are playing them.

What's going on here? Nothing certain, but this could be an indication that Job and his family have joined with God in the music of creation, that they have stopped being spectators and have chosen to work with God. By extension this includes the work to create a just world, the world that Job has demanded of God. Such a world is not a given, but we can help bring it about. This is all speculation, but it does take Job another step on the journey out of himself.

The Book of Job is not the only place in the Bible where images work to free us from ourselves. In the passage from Revelation, there are vivid images of the new creation: the river of life, the throne of God and of the Lamb, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit. More important than the meaning of any one of these images is their accumulative power to astonish us. They invite us to experience the wonder of God's new creation. If we're self preoccupied we won't be able to accept their invitation to mystery, to experience that which is beyond our understanding.

Such experiences are not limited to the Bible. Wonder, awe, and amazement are all around us, if we can let go of ourselves for awhile. I served a church once that offered an annual excursion into the Boundary Waters Canoe Area. I always went; I never received hazardous duty pay for going. I remember an early trip when our older son was eight or so. He and I

shared a canoe with a friend and his son. We'd canoed and portaged for quite a while. If you know the Boundary Waters, then you know that the portages that you lug your canoe across from lake to lake are measures in rods. I never figured out just how long a rod was. But I am convinced that measuring the portages in rods was a trick to suck me into carrying a canoe uphill for miles at a time. I also know that rods are a flexible measure that gets longer as the days goes on.

It was getting late in the afternoon. The boys had given it their best, but they were fading, all of us were fading. We'd just portaged over a vast number of expanding rods into yet another lake. We tried to keep morale up by playing 20 Questions, but interest was dropping fast. Then, as we were turning into a small bay, my friend put his fingers to his lips. There by the shore was a huge bull moose languidly stuffing himself with plant life. None of us said a word; we were awestruck by the sight. We went from fatigue to rapt attention. We barely breathed. Then after ten minutes or so, without rush or concern, the moose clambered up the bank and back into the woods. It took some time before any of us could say anything. Then when we could, it was all we could talk about. There's nothing like seeing a moose to make you forget about yourself.

Another example, when I was serving this church five years ago, I visited the Goodsell Observatory at Carleton. I can't recall exactly what night it was, but one night a month Carleton opened the observatory to the public. Through the larger of their two telescopes, I got to see the moon and the details of its craters. Another time I got to see the rings of Saturn. Breathtaking! On the cover of our bulletins is a picture taken of deep space. Incredible! It draws us outward into vastness and wonder. Whether its deep space or a sunset, the rings of Saturn or hoarfrost on a bright, winter day, nature is abundant with such experiences.

In its call to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves, the church offers us another way out of ourselves. Through acts of love and caring, we let go of self absorption. Our concern for the needs of others frees us from preoccupation with our own concerns. Jesus said that we save our lives by losing them in his service. I believe this loss of ourselves in caring for others is one of the things that he meant by this. It's like the Blake image of playing the instruments, participating in the work of God.

I'll close with a story from Dakota by Kathleen Norris. It's about two old monks, Abbot Lot and Abbot Joseph:

Abbot Lot went to see Abbot Joseph and said, "Father, according as I am able, I keep my little rule, and my little fast, my prayer, meditation, and contemplative silence; and cleanse my heart of bad thoughts, now what more should I do?"

To me Abbot Lot sounds a little passive aggressive. He's blameless because he hasn't done much, just kept all his little rules in a little life.

The story continues:

Abbot Joseph rose up in reply and stretched out his hands to heaven and his fingers became like flames of fire. He said "Why not become all flame?"

Of course on one level this makes no sense. His fingers bursting into fire – come on. But on another level this is a wonderful story. "Why not become all flame?" Why not get out of yourself and experience the wonder of creation? There is so much more out there than we've dreamed of. Instead of a little closed in life, how about a big opened up one? After all didn't Jesus say, "I came so that you could have life and have it abundantly"? Amen.