

Scripture

Job 38:1-11

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:

2 “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

3 Gird up your loins like a man,
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

4 “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.

5 Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?

6 On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone

7 when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings[a] shouted for joy?

8 “Or who shut in the sea with doors
when it burst out from the womb?—

9 when I made the clouds its garment,
and thick darkness its swaddling band,

10 and prescribed bounds for it,
and set bars and doors,

11 and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther,
and here shall your proud waves be stopped’?

Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32

1 O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever.

2 Let the redeemed of the Lord say so,
those he redeemed from trouble

3 and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.

23 Some went down to the sea in ships,
doing business on the mighty waters;

24 they saw the deeds of the Lord,
his wondrous works in the deep.

25 For he commanded and raised the stormy wind,
which lifted up the waves of the sea.

26 They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths;
their courage melted away in their calamity;

27 they reeled and staggered like drunkards,
and were at their wits’ end.

28 Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he brought them out from their distress;
29 he made the storm be still,
and the waves of the sea were hushed.
30 Then they were glad because they had quiet,
and he brought them to their desired haven.
31 Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.
32 Let them extol him in the congregation of the people,
and praise him in the assembly of the elders.

Sermon:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

We have before us this morning three readings that have to do with chaos – Job, the Psalm, and Jesus in the storm.

The dictionary defines chaos as complete disorder and confusion. When we speak of chaos we are referring to a state in which there are no rules or boundaries; no patterns or predictability; nothing solid upon which to set our feet.

Job was feeling this sense of dislocation and discombobulation as he confronted God. The world, to him, had become shifting and shapeless, unpredictable and irrational.

We understand Job as a good man; the bible describes him as being blameless and upright.

He lived well in the eyes of God, keeping away from evil and regularly making sacrifices for each of his sons and daughters, just in case any of them had any impure thoughts or secret sins.

Job also lived well in the eyes of the world. He had many sons and daughters, thousands of animals: sheep, goats, camels, oxen, and donkeys. He had many servants, great wealth, and the respect of his neighbours.

Then all at once he lost it all. Invading armies and natural disasters claimed his vast herds and the servants that tended them. His sons and daughters were killed, and Job himself was afflicted with sores from the top of his head to the soles of his feet.

We are left with an image of a once great man now dressed in rags, sitting in dust and ash, scratching his sores with a broken piece of pottery. It's a pathetic image of a man who has fallen a great distance.

But, despite the calamity that befell Job, he was still able to say ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.’

When Job’s wife urged him to curse the name of God, Job replied ‘Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?’ Now, if I were faced with the utter devastation of my world, as Job had been, I’m not sure that I would be as sanguine.

As the book of Job unfolds, his three friends do their best to convince him that all of this disaster must be the result of some hidden sin; that this kind of thing doesn’t come out of the blue. Job must have done something to deserve this kind of treatment.

Their words are a foreshadowing of the disciples question to Jesus when they confronted a blind man. ‘Who sinned, Jesus, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’

There is a certain worldview, and a common one at that, that would have us believe that good things happen to good people, and bad things happen to bad people. This idea is as old as mankind and has been called many things over the years, from karma to the prosperity gospel. This morning I’ll refer to it as the worldview of *just desserts*.

According to this framework, those who live a good life and are obedient to God’s commands will be rewarded with good fortune – health, wealth, and other blessings. Those who sin and disobey God’s commandments will meet misfortune – illness, poverty, and other woes. This legalistic moral framework, focused on right and wrong, is considered by many to be the very essence of justice.

The theory of *just desserts* works in a world with no God as well. If we think good thoughts and do good things then we attract good to ourselves, and if we think evil thoughts and do evil then evil will be sure to seek us out.

But to Job, this worldview of *just desserts* no longer has any meaning. As Job sat among the ashes he reviewed his life and could find no fault.

‘I haven’t lusted after women;’ he cried to God. ‘I haven’t lied or cheated, nor have I mistreated any of my servants. I haven’t ignored the cries of the poor, rejoiced in my enemy’s downfalls, worshiped money, or bused the land itself.’

Finally, Job confronted God directly, saying ‘I will come before you and make my case. I have no guilt, I am justified, and I deserve better than this.’

‘Let the Almighty answer me!’ he challenged.

It makes me think of the movie *Bruce Almighty*, in which Jim Carey's character has a similar moment in which he challenges God with the words 'You're the one who should be fired. The only one not doing his job around here is you. Answer me!'

All Bruce and Job can see is injustice. As Job sits in the ashes, picking his scabs with a potshard, all the evidence would suggest that his understanding of the world is inadequate. But, that worldview of good begets good is the only thing left standing between him and the unbridled chaos of the world. Job is desperate that chaos not prevail, so he holds fast to his worldview of *just desserts*, even though it is patently not true.

We're not so different from Job. We think the same way most of the time. We forget that the sun and the rain fall on the good and the evil alike. When bad things happen we cry out 'Why me, Lord? What did I do?'

Bad things will happen to us. Spouses die; tornadoes and storms will come. We will fall ill, we will lose jobs, we will lose fortunes. Sometimes we will be morally righteous and we will pay for it.

I remember in grade one somebody drew on the teacher's desk with permanent marker. When she discovered the crime she confronted the class with the terrible deed, and I was shocked that anybody could dare be so bad. The teacher mistook the horror on my face as guilt, and declared me the culprit. I had to spend the next recess scrubbing her desk, my face red with shame and my cheeks wet with tears at the injustice. My parents, of course, took the teacher's word over mine and so the humiliation was doubled after school.

Our goodness is not a shield against adversity – not by any means. But we live as though it is, because to admit otherwise is to embrace something even more terrifying: that the world is an unpredictable and unsafe place.

Chaos is scary. When things are not predictable, we get very uncomfortable. That's because chaos limits our control. We like to think that we are in control of things, that we are masters of our own self-created universes.

We go to school, get diplomas and other accreditations, we get safe jobs and save money, pay our taxes, buy insurance, obey speed limits, do up our seatbelts, and throw away yoghurt that is past its best before date. And we think that if we do these things then we are owed a good, safe life.

Then along come the storms.

The security that we try to build for ourselves is nothing more than illusion. Of course we should be prudent and think of the future as we go about our daily living, but to think that somehow our empty ritual keeps the forces of chaos at bay is a fool's game.

I think of how insurance is marketed; don't leave your family unprotected – buy this product to protect yourself and your loved ones against fire, flood, accident, injury, illness, unemployment, fraud, or identity theft. Insurance doesn't protect anyone from anything. Insurance can help you rebuild after a catastrophic life event - there is a purpose and use for insurance – but it's not protection, it's recompense. Yet insurance companies know that they can sell us insurance by playing on our fear of chaos and implying that they can save us from it.

The fact is that chaos is out there, and our feeble efforts will not eliminate it.

In the bible chaos is often represented by surging waters. The initial chaos at the beginning of time was described as amorphous liquid, no shape or structure, heaving in the deep. God's word made a space within that chaos that could support life, but very quickly human sin appeared, and by Noah's time the magnitude of the sin was so great and God's order so disrupted that those chaotic waters returned, surging again over the face of the earth. Humanity that turned away from God was overwhelmed by the waters of chaos.

In fact, this theme is one that occurs repeatedly in the Hebrew Testament. When people turn their backs on God and try to create their own security, they are washed away by waves of chaos. Those waves can be literal waves as in the flood, but we also find waves of mixed languages, foreign armies, disease, and famine. Whenever God's people begin to think that they have things under control and that they are the masters of their own fate, something unexpected comes along and shakes everything up.

This doesn't necessarily mean that chaos is God's chosen tool of punishment. That would fit our *just desserts* worldview, but there is something much more sophisticated going on if we read deeply into the text and meditate upon what is actually happening.

The thing to understand is that chaos is a threat to my kingdom, not to God's kingdom. That is important enough for me to repeat. Chaos is a threat to my kingdom, not to God's kingdom. Chaos will tear my kingdom apart; the storms will knock my tower down – bricks all over the place.

So if I am building my own kingdom to provide myself with security and comfort, eventually something will happen that will destroy what I have built. When that happens, I will have nothing left, and will be able to do nothing but lament with Job 'Why God? What have I done to deserve this?'

When we look at God's response to Job, we learn something about chaos.

As we recall, Job declared that he was without sin and so did not deserve what he had received. He challenged God 'Answer me!' and then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind.

'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?' If that was not enough to put Job in his place the next words ought to have.

'Gird up your loins like a man,
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.'

God began his response by declaring that he does not answer to man, but man will answer to him. But curiously, we find in God's series of questions an answer to Job's lament.

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?

Today's reading only contains a few verses, but God's response goes on for four chapters and spans the whole universe. God goes through the works of creation from the birth of the seas to the movement of the constellations, from the patterns of wind and rain to the customs of wild creatures.

In challenging Job with all these questions that he was completely unable to answer, God was telling Job 'Your categories are far too small. You think in terms of the courtroom; I think in terms of the cosmos. Your human theories cannot possibly capture the complexity of the universe, nor can your human understanding contain the chaos.' Most of the time our worldview is far too small for us to have understanding.

What appears to be chaos in fine detail can often be resolved with a wider lens; sometimes we're simply too close to see all the moving parts and so we simply don't get it. In Job's case, God was communicating that while Job was focused on his present circumstance, which admittedly was quite dire, God was focused on Job's eternal circumstance.

What Job saw as chaos, God saw as part of a plan.

Now at this point we have to be a little careful, because this idea can be abused. Last week I spoke about how parts of Romans 13 have been used in the past to justify injustice. What I'm sharing with you this morning can likewise be reduced to a simplistic platitude like 'God works to the good in all things.'

There is truth in this saying, but it has often been misused to minimize people's pain and invalidate what they are going through. During a tragedy like the death of a spouse or the loss of one's home it is little comfort to hear phrases like 'it's all part of God's plan,' or 'God never gives more than you can handle.' In fact, these words can be downright offensive and patronizing.

We have to return to the idea of the two kingdoms. The turmoil and grief that we feel during times of personal catastrophe are very real. We will have times in which we feel isolation, pain, illness, meaninglessness, rejection, and failure. We feel these things because when chaos intrudes, our kingdom suffers damage.

The towers that we have built fall, and we feel powerful loss when they do. And we rail against God, accusing him of injustice.

And God responds to us saying 'Yes, your tower fell down. But you didn't. Your finite kingdom has crumbled, but mine never will. And where is it that you truly live – in your illusory kingdom or in my eternal one?'

The truth is that our own kingdoms will inevitably fall. As finite, created beings we all have an end, so even if we live a blessed life of health, wealth, and happiness, on our deathbeds we will finally see the forces of chaos marshalling and will realize the futility of living to self as our own created kingdom crumbles.

Chaos is not something that we can escape, nor is it something we can avoid. Like Job we will all be faced with personal catastrophe that we haven't brought upon ourselves.

But even though these fearsome things are very real, they do not have the final word. God's first word at the beginning of time emerged out of chaos; creating structure, meaning, and intelligibility. Despite the existence of chaos, the world rests on a secure foundation. God's all powerful word continues to be spoken amid the noise and chaos of our daily lives.

It is the word that says 'Do not be afraid, for I am with you. Despite all the storms, I will never leave or forsake you.'

And that is enough.

Let us close in prayer.

O Lord our God,
when we cry out to you in distress,
you bring us through desperate circumstances.
You can quiet the storm to a whisper
and hush the sea's waves,
so great is your power.
Help us to trust you, then,
whatever we may face,
knowing that you will lead us
to the harbor we have been hoping for.
We offer you our thanks and praise. Amen.