

God Is In Whirlwinds Not Boxes  
A Sermon for the Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost  
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*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, 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?*

*Who provides for the raven its prey,  
when its young ones cry to God,  
and wander about for lack of food?"*

*Job 38:1-7, 34-41*

Author Anne Lamott wrote, “You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.” Maybe that hits a little too close to home these days, and really, we can apply this idea to more than hate; we all have an image of God that we hold to be truth, as did Job and his friends. We think we know what God is like. We have it set in our minds how God acts, what God is concerned with, and whom God will reward and punish.

Theologians and biblical scholars have written volumes about the character of God. The idea we've formed in our heads about God works quite well, until it doesn't. When the chaos comes too close, suddenly the tried and true isn't working. There is no comfort to be found, things are not okay, and it appears God is not keeping God's promises. We take down the box of theology from the top shelf of our dusty closet, and when we open it, expecting to find the God we have been defining and confining in that box for so long, we discover the box is empty.

Over the past few weeks, we have noticed that Job's friends held onto an idea of God that assumed that all deeds lead to consequences and conversely that a consequence must be the result of some deed. They were certain that Job must have sinned and that his afflictions were the consequence – a punishment from God. But they were basing their assumptions on abstract knowledge, rather than personal experience. In our text last week, though, we saw how Job moved through his long-held ideas about how God works, finally let go of what others were saying, and simply cried out to God in lament.

And then in today's reading, God ... shows up, ripping the top off of Job's carefully constructed box. Be careful what you ask for because you just might get it! Sometimes I wonder if this is why we are afraid to go deep into prayer, deep into silence with God; because God just might show up!

Well, God does show up, and takes Job on a whirlwind tour of creation, though we only hear a very small part of that today. In chapters 38-41, we find the most beautiful and poetic expression in scripture of God's grandeur and creativity. If you read no other part of Job, I would encourage you to read God's speech from the whirlwind. And in this lengthy description of creation, which is much longer than the creation narratives in Genesis, humanity is hardly mentioned. In fact, it is suggested that humanity is not the center of creation and that God takes delight in the very creatures that cause chaos – Behemoth and Leviathan – those creatures over which humanity has no control.

God gives a place in creation to the forces of wildness, including the sea (which was the ancient symbol of chaos), but God also places boundaries on them. In Job 38:8-11 God says, “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’?” It appears chaotic to us when God gives nature and creatures the freedom to be who they were created to be. In this vision of creation, the world is not always a safe place for humans, but it is a world of energy and beauty and the Creator delights in it.

We see that God does not directly address Job's suffering or answer his questions, but God does invite Job to take his eyes off of himself and to see the world in its larger perspective. Speaking out of the whirlwind, God blows all of Job's carefully stored boxes off the shelf. Just as Job needed to trust his own experience over the words of his well-meaning friends, now Job must trust God's experiences, power, and knowledge as being far beyond his own. His perception changes as he senses the majesty of God, and Job is transformed by the experience of suffering and by seeking out God in the midst of his suffering.

So often we are comfortable in our knowledge of God, we have God stored safely in a box on the shelf, and it is only when the whirlwinds of chaos blow into our lives that we take a good hard look at what is in our faith box. Sooner or later, we experience chaos in life on an individual or communal level. These past two years of pandemic life have been a place of chaos for many, and perhaps the Church has become a box on the shelf. We have run to our box and discovered that what we expected to be inside is not there. Worship is different in every way, and what happened to coffee hour, the youth acolytes, the flower guild, the children's ministry?

When we began talking about this last spring in our vestry meetings, we first wanted to blame our suffering and loss on the pandemic, but we came to realize that the pandemic has only opened up those dusty boxes we've been storing in the church closets for years. It has taken the tops off of these boxes, and looking inside we find that what always worked so well for us is no longer working. This is not unique to Christ and Grace, it's happening in churches of every denomination, and it is challenging our self-certainty and our assumptions of how church should look and what we are called to do. Yes, it is daunting, and yes, God is here to meet us in the whirlwind.

Like Job, we must begin to trust God's power and knowledge, we must allow God to work in the chaos, and be open to learning something new about God and about ourselves. Suffering and discomfort can be that liminal place between the old and the new, between chaos and order. It can be that place where we are challenged to grow, to choose life over death. To be alive is to continually experience change and discomfort that are often a part of transformation. God calls us into the larger perspective, into the grandeur of creation that is continually being made new.

We don't know what the church will look like in the next seven months, seven years, or seven decades, and that can be scary. Can we trust that God is with us in the chaos, even as we look beyond all the empty boxes, and classrooms and pews? Will we, like Job, seek out God's plan for us as we remain in dialogue with God and one another?

Perhaps we can take some time this week to sit with our potsherd and consider the chaos all around us, asking God to unleash the astounding and mighty power of creation in our own lives and here at Christ and Grace. This is risky because we might just get what we ask for, and we might find that our boxes are empty, but what a whirlwind of creative and lifegiving work awaits us!

Amen.