

Setting God Free

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Job 38:1-7

“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?”

Baptist Principles – Religious Freedom

Movement 1 – Job’s Book of Answers?

Have you ever heard of the patience of Job? Have you ever heard someone describe Job in such a way? Job is often seen as the pinnacle of patience as he endured all of his suffering and yet never turned from God; Job stayed resolute in his faith even with all of his hardships. Some say that the book of Job offers an example, a path of how to endure suffering and stay true to God. If we were to read only the beginning of this book we may find ourselves agreeing with such a conclusion. Think about this. In the first chapter Job loses his livestock, his home and his children, and his response is to fall on the floor and say, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” (Job 1:21) We would expect someone instead to rant and rave. We would expect someone to demand to know why such an atrocity would happen, but Job instead says, “Blessed be the name of the Lord.” This is giant example of a powerful patience with one’s faith. This is an example that many hold up, place on the pedestal as how we all should live as Christians.

Yet the patience of Job does not capture the entirety of the book. The depth and complexity of this poetic and powerful work goes deeper than just Job’s initial patience. Eventually, as Job suffers more and more, the tenor of the conversation moves from blessing and trusting God to questioning God and the reasons for the trauma that Job has to endure. If we were to continue reading the book we would hear Job curse the day he was born, wondering why he was born at all. We would hear anger, resentment and a deep hurt because Job believed that his suffering was undeserved. The patience of Job would not last; it would not be long until Job would begin to question. Job wants to know why he, someone who is righteous, is suffering and why others who are wicked and far from the favor of the Lord seem to be blessed with a good life. Job wants answers; he wants justification for his suffering.

You see, the book of Job is not only about his patience, but is an ongoing conversation about what is good and evil, who deserves to suffer and why horrible things happen. The biblical scholar Barry Bandstra describes the book of Job as a collection of writings pondering the moral order of the universe. Thornton Wilder’s classic novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* takes a clue from Job and continues to ponder the question “why do bad things happen to good people?” In that work, Wilder writes about a bridge in Peru that collapsed in 1714 with five people on it. In his work, Wilder challenges the reasoning that some religious figures offer for why five decent and good people were allowed to die. Wilder challenges the theological answers given to such a tragedy.

Wilder is joining a conversation that we find in the book of Job. It is a conversations shared by Job and his friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar and later in the book Elihu. It is a conversation that considers what Job might have done to deserve his suffering. We hear this question of suffering asked by Job when he demands a reason

from God for his suffering, assuming that he does not deserve it. We hear the question addressed in a round about way by Job's wife when she presumes that her husband's life no longer has any worth and that Job should just, "curse God and die." When we read the book of Job, we are not reading about a virtuous person, although he was righteous, we are not given the perfect example of how to suffer, but we are entering into a conversation. We are entering into a conversation of folks who all claim to have the answers. They all claim to have the answers about suffering, the answers about the goodness of God, and the answer to how Job should respond to his plight. It is a book of arrogance and assurance. It is a book of suffering and grief. It is a book of beautiful, profound and provocative poetry. The book of Job offers more than just patience but depth and breadth to the question of suffering, the question of faith, and the idea of God.

Movement 2 – Our Demand for Answers

We are continuing the conversation. We continue the conversation of who God is, of how we are to be faithful to God, and that ever prodding, ever present question of suffering. We join Harold Kushner and ask, "Why do bad things happen to good people" when we witness tragedy from cyclones to earthquakes to tsunamis to storms. We see these atrocities and ask why did those people suffer, why did those people die? When we stop for a moment and take stock of our lives, our faith, and our relationship with the church and our relationship with God we find ourselves asking questions of the nature of God and the substance of our faith. When we find ourselves barraged with questions of faith, questions of doctrine, questions of belief we find ourselves looking for an answer of how to follow God.

The conversation that we find in Job is not just one of suffering, but one of doctrine and belief and we are continuing that conversation. We are also asking questions of faith, of discipleship and of the nature of God. We ask questions and we look for answers, and that is where the church comes in. The church hears this conversation; the church notices the questioning faces and jumps in with answers. Churches, denominations, religious movements are notorious for offering answers. Just like Job's friends, the church sits down with the grieving and offers answers such as, "it is a part of God's plan, or there is something we are supposed to learn from this." Wilder directly criticizes the church's attempt to offer a well thought out theological answer for why the five on the bridge died. They must have sinned in one way or another; they deserved it and that is why they died. The church offers an answer. The answers vary depending on which part of the church you hail from, but the answers are offered nonetheless. Those from the fundamental camps offer answers of surety and clarity. These are the folks who would claim that Gandhi is in hell because he was not a Christian. These are the folks who would claim that the Jews suffered in the holocaust because that must have sinned in one way or another. These are the folks who tear families apart because of their surety of doctrine and the nature of God. Those from the liberal camp would instead offer answers of historical veracity, desiring to be able to prove what we know and leave the rest to a kind of moral relativity. Others would just claim that it is all about your personal, individual relationship with God, and that is all that matters. The answer all vary.

The answers may be offered, but at times they are forced. Churches have pushed to have control with the government because they were so sure of their stance, their understanding of faith and of God. They had the answers and thought it would be best for

all humanity if they were to legislate those answers. In England in the 1600s, the religion of the day depended upon the ruling king or queen of the day, yet constant was that each monarch believed that they were right with their perspective faith and that their faith was appropriate for the masses.

James McClendon claims that each faith community carries a set of convictions. These convictions are those beliefs that shape the community and are core to the identity of the community. All communities have convictions yet what we have found is the emphasis to use and view these convictions as an overreaching truth and doctrine and to impose them on others. Just as Job's friends tried to impose their idea of God upon Job, just as Job tried to hold to his conviction of God, we sit across from other Christians, from other individuals and attempt, and presume to impose our thoughts, ideas and convictions upon others. We try to legislate it, we try to enforce it, forcing God into our doctrinal boxes. I once heard of a "Christian" counselor who met with someone who was experiencing the signs and symptoms of depression. This counselor had all of the answers for this person and claimed, just like Job's friends claimed, that this young man must have sinned and that is why he was feeling sorry and sad and displaying signs of depression. The young man had to reconcile his sins in order to find a sense of peace in his life.

Do you have the answers? Do you push your answers on other? Are others pushing their answer on you? We demand answers, we search for answers, and we claim answers in our faith and our relationship and understanding of God.

Movement 3 – The Theological Bottom

Our search and claim for the answers will eventually cause trouble. Our claim and demand of answers will eventually lead to distress and despair. Our search and claim for answers will lead to trouble.

How many times have denominations clashed because they all claimed to have the answers? In France, Catholics and Protestants fought and killed each other because they both claimed to have the answers and would not budge. In Germany Anabaptists were persecuted because they were seen as diverging from the accepted faith, the accepted answers concerning the Lord. The early Baptists left England for Amsterdam for religious freedom and security because they were not free to worship as they felt moved. After a number of years they returned only to face persecution because they practiced something different from the norm, the state sanctioned practice of faith. Thomas Helwys, one of the early leaders of the movement produced a document defending his faith and approach to Christianity and in response the King of England had him imprisoned. Helwys died in prison because people disagreed about the answers.

Here in America Quakers and Baptist were persecuted, beaten, dismembered and hung by Congregationalists because they disagreed about the answers. The search and the claim of the answers have led to trouble.

Or those who are in distress, those who are hurting, those who are facing evil yearn for answers, and Kushner speaks about finding the answers empty and wanting. "Because it was part of God's plan," does not offer any comfort for the grieving parent. "Because God is teaching us something" paints a picture of a cruel and distant God to the hurting sibling. "Because we sinned and deserve it," only offers a picture of a punitive God of retribution. The young man I spoke of heard the Christian counselor, took his

advice to heart and left seeing himself as a broken and worthless person. He considered that his sins must be so great that God would have left him completely, and in a moment of helplessness because of the answers he received he took his own life. The answers can be dangerous.

From a lack of religious freedom to a lack of spiritual freedom, to a suffocating faith, the answers we offer, the answers we embrace can be dangerous and lead to trouble.

Ebenezer Smith, a Baptist preacher from New England in the mid 1700s wrote a poem lamenting the spiritual climate of America because of the lack of religious freedom. He painted a picture of the possibility of America as a place of religious freedom, a place of churches flourishing, but claimed that envy got in the way and was breaking the universal church. Envy over the answers, envy over control cut a wound in the religious landscape of America.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” When we force the answers upon others we infringe upon these rights, the rights of the individual to freely search for God and worship God. Yet just as the Government of England was oppressive of the early Americans, the church, the denomination, the religious answers threaten to crush us, suffocate us and leave us wanting for more.

Remember, the conversation we are hearing in Job is about answers, and when God finally speaks those who claimed to have the answers are put in their place. Out of the whirlwind the Lord speaks to Job, and challenges him. “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” asks the Lord. Who is this that claims to know something? Who is this who claims to have all of the answers when he has nothing? The words of the Lord shame Job and his friends, and we can hear the Lord saying the same to us, “who are you to claim to know all about the Lord?” God comes to us and challenges our answers, our assumptions that we claim and we push upon others. Our answers can lead to trouble.

Movement 4 – A Call for Humility

Hold your answers and walk carefully. Hold your answers with humility, with openness and walk carefully. For God could come to you just as God approached Job and ask that humbling and challenging question, “where were you?” Picture this in your mind. Job has been growing in his anger. Job has been growing in his unrest for his suffering and has been suggesting that he did not deserve his plight. Job has been demanding an answer of the Lord based on his own understanding, his own conviction that one suffers because one deserves it. Job has been refuting the answers of his friends, the convictions of his friends and has been claiming with bravado and grandeur that he is in the right. Yet then the whirlwind bursts onto the scene. A violent and powerful wind breaks into the conversation. Just as happened with Ezekiel, just as happened with Nehemiah, and just as happened with Zechariah a storm emerges and takes the center of the stage. The storm, the strong wind emerges and from the storm we hear the voice of God. The voice of God calls Job to task. “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements...or who stretched the line

upon it?" God is challenging Job, calling his knowledge to question and claiming that Job has none. Humbling are the words of the Lord as they crash upon Job and his answers. Humbling are the words of God as they break apart Job's convictions. Humbling are the words of the Lord as they bring Job down to his knees. The words of the Lord remind Job that he knows nothing that he cannot claim to have the corner on the theological particularities of the divine. The voice of the Lord brings Job down to a place of theological humility.

Can we not also imagine God saying the same to many of us? Can we not imagine God saying to the churches that claim to have the answers, the churches that claim to have God in a box that in the end they know nothing? Where were you when the foundation of the earth was laid? And yet we claim and we presume to know the mind of God. Where were you with the morning stars sang together and all of the heavenly beings shouted for joy? And yet we presume to know the right way to be a Christian. Through this passage, through this text, through the book of Job we are brought to a place of humility.

We are all brought to a place of theological humility as our answers and presumptions are shattered by the voice of the Lord. What can we say, what can we do in return but to stay in that place of humility? We need to continue to walk in the humility, in the unknowing of the Lord. So often I work with individuals who are hurting and are looking for an answer of one sort or another. They want answers; they want to have something they can hold onto, a false floor upon which to stand. Yet I cannot offer an answer of why. I cannot offer a clear response on behalf of the Lord. Instead all I can do is stand in a place of humility and say I do not know why your father died. I do not know why you lost your job. I do not know why your child is suffering. I do not know, nor do I presume to know, I can only humbly look to the Lord for guidance and help.

This is the place of humility we are all brought to through the powerful words of the Lord. A place where we will let go of our answers and rest in the ambiguity. A place where we listen for the voice of the Lord rather than telling the Lord what to say. A place where we offer an idea, a possibility but then say, "I could be wrong."

The ethicist and theologian Robert Franklin once spoke about the notion of tragic reconciliation. Tragic reconciliation is when both parties wronged turn to each other and say, I might have been wrong. When Protestants and Catholics look to each other from that place of humility and say, I might be wrong. When Christians and Muslims look to each other and say, "I might be wrong." We are called to utter and to embrace these challenging and transforming words, "I might be wrong."

When we do that, then we are opening the doors to the church in a powerful and transforming way. When we leave room for change and growth then we can change and grow. When we claim that we might be wrong we are shedding the audacity and the arrogance of doctrinal claims and staying open to God. Churches that have the legislative power over other churches could be wrong. We all could be wrong, so enter that place of humility.

Movement 5 – Back off the Answers

Let go of the answers. Let go, not of your convictions, but of your desire to have your convictions to be the end, the final word for God. Enter into the whirlwind. Enter into the whirlwind and be swept up into the ambiguity, the unknowing and the power of

the divine. Rodger Williams argued for religious freedom in Rhode Island not sure what it would look like. He was told that folks like Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Quakers and Jews would cause a state of chaos and disorder, but Williams took the chance and fought to have different people with different answers freely live side by side. William Penn took a chance. He took a chance to create a neighborhood with diversity regardless of the dangers inherent in such a religious experiment. James Madison argued that the nation did not need to have an established religion, but should exist in a religious climate of disestablishment. He argued for a freedom of religion where different answers are shared and experienced. Enter into the whirlwind with these great leaders and others. Enter into the place of ambiguity, of unknowing and of trusting the Lord.

We do this by constantly listening to others. We do this by resting in the ambiguity we create. We do this by saying, “I don’t know,” to the nagging questions. After all, we did not create the world, so we cannot presume to understand it. The early Baptist argued for religious freedom, not just so they could worship, but so that there would be a freedom for God as well as for them. The early Baptists claimed that when Christians were forced into specific answers, when Christians were forced into specific ideas of what was appropriate for faith, the Holy Spirit was held back, shackled by our arrogance. Yet when there is a freedom of religions, then there is a freedom of the Holy Spirit to reach different people in different ways. Let God be God.

Back off your answers, let go of your answers and let the Holy Spirit take you, move you and lift you up. We don’t need to have a monopoly of answers; we only need to trust the Lord. Trust the Lord and let God be God. Set God free and follow the Lord.

Movement 6 – Don’t Lead, Follow

Follow the Lord. Don’t demand answers, just follow the Lord. Don’t try to always understand, just follow the Lord. When you face a moment of tragedy, when the difficulties of life are weighing you down, don’t look for the reasons or demand to know why, instead look to the Lord. Look to the Lord and say, “I am hurting.” Look to the Lord and say, “my heart aches.” Look to the Lord and share not the answers you expect or demand, but your wounds, your sorrow and your grief. Then the Lord will be willing to lead you through your darkness, through your hardships and to glory. If you are at the foot of the cross and see Christ suffering, do you want to try to understand why? Do you want to give a reason for the nails, or instead to realize that Christ suffers just as we suffer. We may have glimpses of why, we may receive a taste of the reason, but what we do know is that the suffering is palpable and is great. In your suffering, with your questions, look to the Lord and know that God, that Christ suffers as well.

When you are struggling with issues of doctrine and issues of faith continue with those struggles, but follow the Lord. Follow the Lord not to the halls of theological answers but into the world of ambiguity, into peace of Christ, mercy of God and love spread by the Holy Spirit. Follow the Lord.

McClendon argues that the attempt to force one’s convictions upon others cheapens the convictions themselves. Rather than arguing who is right, we instead should be living out our convictions, regardless of what others say or think. We should be showing others what we believe rather than forcing it on others. That is letting go of the answers, and setting God free.

There will be times when it will seem difficult. There will be times when it will seem challenging, but continue to trust and follow the Lord. Enter into the whirlwind, the chaos, and the struggles and follow the Lord. Instead of telling God what to do, ask to be filled, to be led and to be sustained by God. Set God free and follow the Lord to justice. Set God free and follow the Lord to mercy. Set God free and follow the Lord to peace. Set God free and follow the Lord to grace. Set God free and follow the Lord to the glory that is the Kingdom of God.

Rather than demanding answers of the Lord, ask God to fill you, to sustain you and to save you. Like the woman at the well we seek with our demand for answers, things that we can not satisfy. Let go and listen to Christ saying, "Draw from my well that never shall run dry." Fill my cup Lord, I lift it up, Lord! Come and quench this thirsting of my soul; Bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more, fill my cup, fill it up and make me whole!

AMEN