Pentecost 4 Proper 7

June 20, 2021

Job 38:1-11

Some years ago, there was a woman who was in a Bible study group I belonged to. She is a good and kind woman, full of faith, and has a long history of service to her church.

I don’t know if it’s changed, but, when we were in the same study group, it was her conviction that it is not right for us to question God. Questioning God, in her opinion, demonstrated a lack of faith, because we’re supposed to trust that God is on top of things, even when we don’t understand them.

I once asked her if the presence of questions in the Bible — such as we see in the Psalms, for instance — might mean that God is OK with us asking questions. She remained firm in her conviction: questioning God is wrong. It’s not our place to question God or God’s divine plan.

I think that we have some pretty good cause to believe Job would have disagreed with her.

At the beginning of the story of Job, we hear that he is a good and pious man, careful to observe festivals, make offerings, and generally live his life in accordance with the law. He’s wealthy and has 7 sons and 3 daughters. In short, he has a good life and is faithful to God.

But then everything goes wrong.

In short order, Job loses everything — children, livestock, even his health.

He is left wondering why he — a good and righteous and upright person — is suffering.

While the reader knows why it’s happening, Job is in the dark. We know that God allowed the Accuser to afflict Job so that it could be determined if Job was faithful to God only because God had blessed him, or if Job’s faith was rooted deeper than that.

Over the course of the next 30-something chapters, we hear Job lament his suffering. His friends are sympathetic at first, but eventually they tell Job it’s probably his fault that he’s suffering. They encourage him to think about his life, find the thing that he did to anger God, and repent of it.

In the midst of his laments, in the midst of his insistence that he had done nothing to warrant punishment from God, Job demands God face him and answer his questions, tell him why he — a righteous and pious person — is suffering.

He insists that God give him an answer[[1]](#footnote-1), since, as he understands it, God blesses those who are good and punishes those who aren’t.

He asks, “Why have you made me your target? Why have I become a burden to you? Why do you not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity?”[[2]](#footnote-2)

And “How many are my iniquities and my sins? Make me know my transgression and my sin. Why do you hide your face, and count me as your enemy?”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Along the way, Job’s friends are less than helpful, continuing to insist that he has done something wrong, that God is acting out of divine justice to punish Job for his sins.

Eventually, God shows up, and does so in the midst of a storm.

Chapters 38-41 are God’s response to Job and his friends.

But nowhere in those chapters does God actually answer Job’s question of why he suffered.

Nowhere does God lay out an explanation of divine justice.

Nowhere does God does chastise Job for asking questions. God does not tell Job that he doesn’t deserve to ask questions, doesn’t deserve to have a more full understanding of human suffering or divine justice.

Instead, God shows Job that he’s simply not capable of understanding the answers he seeks. And God challenges Job’s assumptions about God and about the role of humanity in creation.

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements — surely you know!”

Later, God asks, “Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare, if you know all this.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

And, “Is it by your command 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?”[[5]](#footnote-5)

God doesn’t tell Job all these things to humiliate him or put him in his place, but rather to challenge Job’s assumptions and those of his friends that they have anything figured out at all.

Job and his friends were not guilty of asking questions. They were guilty of thinking they had God figured out. They were convinced that divine justice means that God blesses those who are faithful, punishes those who are wicked, and that it’s as simple as that. Therefore, if you are suffering, you must have done something to displease God.

What God’s answer tells Job and his friends, and us, is that creation is far more complex than we can understand. The ways of God are far more complex than we can understand.

But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t ask questions.

It doesn’t mean we shouldn’t wrestle with big things, like the nature God, or of divine justice, or the causes of human suffering.

Indeed, it’s only when we ask these questions that we can grow in our understanding of God.

It’s only by asking, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him,” that the disciples could be open to the notion that Jesus was the Messiah.

So was my friend right? Is it wrong to question God and God’s divine plan?

I don’t think it’s wrong of us to question God, but I think we should be careful if we’re tempted to think we have anything figured out.

And if we’re going to ask questions of God, then we should be ready for God to engage with us, invite us into a deeper understanding of how God perceives creation. Ready for God to challenge our assumptions, and lead us on paths full of wonder and joy.

1. Job 13:3 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Job 7:20b-21a [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Job 13:23-24 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Job 38:16-18 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Job 39:26-27 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)