

MINISTRY RESOURCES FOR SUNDAY 17 OCTOBER 2021

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This material was prepared for the St Stephen's Tuesday congregation (on Zoom), then adapted for use with the Alpine Uniting Church in Jindabyne, where Lauris and I will be for three and a half weeks. This week we continue with Job where things have been building up. Today God comes onto the scene, and the encounter leads to some conclusions that may surprise, even trouble, you.

1 Prayers of Adoration and Confession

(Based on Job 38)

Lord of Creation,

You laid the very foundations of the earth;
you measured out its dimensions,
and laid its cornerstones.

You enclosed the oceans within their bounds,
and forbade them to venture further.

You made the sun to shine,
to rise every day to announce the morning,
and you divided off the darkness from the light.

Only you know the secrets of the earth –
the wellsprings of the sea, the origin of light,
the storehouses of the snow,
and the dimensions of this world.

From you come the intricacy, the beauty and the endless variety of the creation –
the miracle that commands mighty thunderstorms and lightning bolts,
that turns desolation into abundant life,
that breathes intelligence and personality into the creatures of the world.

When we look around us at the world you have created,
we are lost in wonder and praise.

You are indeed a mighty and wonderful God,
and we bow before you in awe.

But even as we acknowledge your greatness and sovereignty,
we confess that we too often elevate ourselves to prime place,
and relegate you to little more than an afterthought.

Our greatest sin is our inflated sense of self,
which leads us to a distorted and self-serving understanding of the world.

We make poor choices,
choose inappropriate priorities,
and look anywhere but to ourselves when things go wrong.

We confess that we are sinful people,
that we are not worthy of your great love and generous grace.

Forgive us, we pray.

Give us the humility to get the world into its right perspective,
the strength to resist the temptations that are ever before us,
and the love for others that we so often lack.

For we ask these things in the name of the One who was without sin,
and yet who gave his life that we might be free of our own sins –
Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour.

Amen

2 **Declaration of Forgiveness.**

The writer of I John wrote this:

*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves,
and the truth is not in us.*

*If we confess our sins,
he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins
and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

So we can be assured that, in Christ Jesus,
our sins are forgiven.

Thanks be to God.

3 **Bible Reading –**

Job 38:1-7, 34-41

Mark 10:35-45

4 **Sermon:** See below

5 **Prayers of the People and Lord's Prayer**

God our Father,

We give thanks that NSW has reached this point,
of beginning to open up after the long Covid lockdown.

So we pray for our community at this time.

We know that there are still dangers,

that unvaccinated people, people with compromised immune systems,
children, and First Nations peoples remain very vulnerable to the virus.

So we pray that our community will embrace caution and common sense,
that we won't all let our hair down and forget to be prudent,

not only for our own sakes,

but for the sake of so many others who depend on our sensible behaviour.

We pray for businesses as they reopen,

that their customers will return,

and with them, so many jobs that have been "on hold" for so long;

we pray for schools and other institutions of learning,

that reopening will prove both joyful and safe for all involved;

we pray for our hospitals and medical professionals,

that they will have sufficient resources

to cope with the anticipated surge in Covid cases.

But most of all, Father, we pray that you will bless this gradual reopening,

that there will be real love and joy as families see each other again,

and as friends come together for the first time in months.

We pray that particular celebrations will be all the more special,

for such things having been impossible for so long;

and we especially pray for a Christmas

at which families and friends can join together in joy and love,

to celebrate the birth of our Saviour,

but also for the delight that such gatherings bring in every other way.

We do ask your oversight and blessing on this time of reopening

And now Father we conclude with the prayer that Jesus gave us,

Our father in heaven,

Hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come;
Your will be done
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
and forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil,
for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and forever.
Amen

6 Blessing and Dismissal

Go now to be the people of God in this place.
Go in peace to love and serve your Lord.
And the blessing of almighty God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be with you now,
and abide with you evermore.
Amen

SERMON

Last week was a fairly typical week in the world of news: we saw terrible suffering among the children of Afghanistan; a deadly volcano on the island of La Palma in the Canaries continuing to destroy homes and livelihoods; a massive leak of financial documents exposing the venal tax-avoidance schemes of the world's most privileged, designed to protect their (often ill-gotten) wealth. Of course there was much more than that, but I honed in on these three stories because each, in its own way, raised the sorts of issues that preoccupy the writer of Job. Why do the innocent suffer? How can we explain the random impact of destructive natural phenomena? How can it be that the dishonest seem always to get away with their dishonesty, and never to be called to account for their rapacity? As we read or watch these stories, our heart cries out, just as Job's heart cried out, God, where are you? Where is your perfect justice? How can these things be?

The book of Job is a piece of literature written to explore the whole matter of human suffering. The Lectionary takes us to Job over a four week period, and the four selected readings really do boil Job down to its essence. Despite "flying over" long sections of the book, we truly do get to grips with Job in the passages we are given. What we've seen in the two weeks so far is that, as a result of a challenge raised by one of God's "staff", "the Adversary" or "the Accuser", who seems to have the job of disabusing God of his alleged naivety, God has agreed to test Job's faithfulness. He has allowed the Adversary to subject Job to terrible suffering. First of all, the wealthy Job lost not only all his possessions, but his children and his servants too – all killed. But Job still refused to curse God, so the Adversary next afflicted him with a dreadful skin ailment, and Job was reduced to sitting in the ashes, scratching his sores with a broken piece of pottery. Despite his wife's urging, Job still refused to curse God. At that point, the Adversary's tests had been met; there is no further mention of his machinations against Job. But that was only the lead-in to the story. The innocent Job's unearned misery is the setting for the book's exploration of the whole matter of human suffering.

Now at the time that Job was written, it was central to much of the thinking of the Israelites that God rewards those who act righteously, but punishes those who don't. Human suffering was the direct result of God's retributive justice. People *suffered* because they had sinned; others *prospered* because they had honoured God and acted with righteousness. Reward and punishment in a well-ordered and completely just world.

So, in Job's time of suffering, three of his friends appear on the scene, purportedly to comfort him, but in fact they end up debating with him. Job insists on his righteousness – and we know that to be true, because at the beginning of the book, God himself declared Job to be righteous – while his friends insist that his suffering *must* be a result of his sinfulness. After all, that's the way it is: suffering is God's punishment for sin. The debate between Job and his friends becomes ever more acrimonious. The friends are absolute disciples of retributive justice;| but Job is not far from them in that belief. *His* issue is that God has just got it wrong in his case. Punishment, okay, but he is righteous and undeserving of the punishment he's received. Job grows more and more assertive, and begins to challenge God, not just about his own situation, but more broadly too. He wants to know why the unrighteous seem to get away with their wrongdoing with apparent impunity, why they seems to prosper and enjoy their ill-gotten wealth. Where's the justice in that? And he demands his own "day in court", to be able to confront God with his innocence and righteousness, and have God show cause as to why he has been so terribly struck down, not only by the complete loss of his prosperity, but also by his terrible physical affliction. Job's sense of justice is offended; retributive justice is not meant to work like this; people like Job are supposed to be rewarded and to prosper, while wrong-doers are supposed to be punished through suffering. God, you've got it wrong and I demand the chance to confront you.

And so we come to today's passage from chapter 38. For the first time since the very beginning of the story, God appears. There's been a lot of talk *about* God; and a strange visitor called Elihu has had a fair bit to say, purportedly *on behalf of* God – although even his words prove not to be correct. But now God arrives on the scene in person – or at least, in the form of a whirlwind. By this stage, apart from decrying the injustice of his own situation, and complaining about the injustice of dishonest people getting off scot-free, Job has also expressed a real dread at the thought of actually facing God. He's come to realise, perhaps, that his cries of injustice may in fact have offended God. So, as readers, we are on tenterhooks to know what will happen, now that God's turned up. We find ourselves pretty much identifying with Job, because we know with certainty that he is, indeed, the righteous person he claims, and we empathise with Job's distress and his sense of injustice. We *want* Job to have his day in court, to be able to make his case to God; *our* sense of justice is every bit as offended as Job's. It's not *fair*. But like Job, we know the power and might of God, and we're apprehensive of his arrival on the scene. Will God listen to Job's case, even enter into a debate with him? Will God make out a case against Job, to establish that Job *is* a sinner after all? Will God apologise to Job for permitting the cruel testing by the Adversary? Or will God be outraged by Job's robust challenge to his justice? What's going to happen now?

At first glance, our passage looks like God has arrived to express his righteous anger at Job, to put Job well and truly in his place. The passage we've read is two short portions of a much longer speech made by God, but what we have well and truly captures the flavour of the whole.

Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? God begins.
Gird up your loins like a man,
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

You wanted to question *me*, says God; that's not how it's going to be! I've got a few questions for *you*. Then comes the onslaught of God's questions to Job:

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?

Then God reels off a list of challenges to Job:

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?

It actually sounds quite bombastic, as if God were simply dismissing Job as so inferior that he just doesn't matter. It's tempting to cast God into a pretty ugly role here, almost as a downright bully. God's angry; Job's for it now; Job's being put well and truly in his place; God is going to pay him out for all his accusations of injustice.

But to read God's powerful speech like that is actually to *misread* it. For one thing, if we were to read ahead, in their final dialogue, now not far away, we'd find that God actually *commends* Job for speaking *truth* about God. God is *not* angry at the very robust charges Job has laid out against him, and God pretty much concedes that what Job has had to say is true. So this powerful speech by God is not born of anger or resentment at Job.

The second point is that what God's speech does is highlight, not any wrongdoing on Job's part, but Job's lack of understanding. Job has been darkening, or obscuring, God's purposes *by words without knowledge*. God's challenge to Job, *Tell me, if you have understanding*, makes the same point. God is not bullying Job, nor rebuking him in the sense that it might seem; God is rather giving Job a sense of perspective: there's a bigger picture here, that you, as a human, have no idea about. You, Job, are trapped within the inadequacy of your limited understanding, and ultimately, the way you see the world is just too narrow and too inadequate. You simply don't have the knowledge to make the judgments you've been making.

Now we could take that assertion from God in two ways. One way would be to accept that God is actively in control of all things, but there's a bigger picture that we can't see. We just have to accept that, when apparently pointless or unjust suffering happens, it's all part of a grand scheme of God's. There's an overarching plan that we can't see. We just have to trust. God knows more than we, and his purposes are being fulfilled in ways that we can't fathom.

I *cannot* think that we should accept that way of understanding God's words to Job. Just to write off horrendous human suffering as "collateral damage" in the outworking of a larger divine scheme can only be described as callous and uncaring. What kind of God would act in such a horrible manner? We cannot accept that interpretation because, as Christians, we know that we have looked God in the face in Jesus Christ, we have seen God's character in the person of Jesus; and it's unthinkable that Jesus would ever endorse such a view of things. Job might be affronted by what he regards as an *unjust* God; but as Christians, we must reject any interpretation that casts God as a *cruel* God. The God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ is the absolute antithesis of cruelty!

I believe that the correct way to understand God's challenge to Job has nothing to do with some unknowable divine master plan. Remember that the preoccupation of the whole of the book of Job has been retributive justice. Both Job and his so-called friends adhere to that belief; their only difference is whether or not Job is guilty of sin, and so deserving of his state of affliction. Neither they nor Job doubt that the world is ruled by retributive justice; what has offended Job is his belief that God's administration of it is just so imperfect. In his long speech to Job, what God is doing is telling Job that that simple view of the world is just not how it is. The bigger picture that Job has not grasped is that the world doesn't conform to orderly rules like that. The creation is just so much more complex than that. It can't be reduced to simple rules of cause and effect. Even in the short passage we have, the things that God challenges Job with are the wild, dangerous things of the earth – lions, ravens, lightning, storms. They do not follow rules; they are unpredictable; they make the world a dangerous place. God is saying to Job, you think that there are simple explanations for everything, but I'm here to tell you that the world is really not like that at all. *That's* the bigger picture that you're not seeing. There is an inherent wildness, and randomness, and danger about the world you live in. All your cries about injustice are based on a completely false premise.

I have a great many Christian friends, people of far stronger faith than mine, who fervently believe that God is firmly in control of all things. When Covid hit, their faith was to the fore: this is all for a purpose. We must put our faith in the fact that God is in control of everything that's happening. Covid must be part of God's plan for the world. But that is *not* what God is saying to Job, not at all. There is some teaching of Jesus found in Luke 13 that is relevant here. Two recent events in Jerusalem had involved terrible suffering and loss of life. Some Galileans had been killed in the Temple itself by Roman soldiers, and a tower had unexpectedly collapsed, killing eighteen people. Believing in retributive justice – this must have happened as a punishment for sin – the crowd assumes that the victims must have been egregious sinners. It's the same argument put to Job by his friends: you *must* be a terrible sinner: the evidence of it is your terrible suffering. But Jesus gives the lie to that whole idea:

Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you ...

Jesus could not be clearer, and he's making the very same point that God makes to Job. Bad stuff happens – randomly, inexplicably, and tragically. It doesn't signal punishment – it's of the nature of a dangerous world that doesn't conform to a simple set of rules.

Does it unsettle you, to confront the fact that God chooses not to control everything that happens? We'll explore the implications of that next week, when we return to Job. But one thing perhaps should be said now. The fact that God chooses not to control everything that happens is the reason that we, as God's creation, have the freedom that is so precious to us. God *chooses* not to control *us*. But our freedom, like so much else in the Creation, is a dangerous thing; we can and do abuse it; and yet our freedom is a blessing none of us would want not to have. And the fact that God chooses not to control everything that happens does *not* mean that God will not reach into the Creation when he sees fit. It does *not* mean that God will not answer our prayers when he sees fit – although we all know that at times he chooses *not* to do so. It does *not* mean that God is uninterested in us, or doesn't care about us. Because in Jesus Christ, God did reach powerfully into this dangerous world, showering humankind with his love and grace and compassion. It is precisely *because* the world is such a dangerous place that we so desperately need the Saviour who is Christ the Lord.

Amen