

October 18, 2015

Tim Hughes

Sermon: Hints of Glory

Old Testament Reading: Job 38:1-42, 40:3-5

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind: ²“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? ³Gird 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. ⁵Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? ⁶On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone ⁷when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? ⁸“Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?— ⁹when I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, ¹⁰and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, ¹¹and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped’?

¹²“Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place, ¹³so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth, and the wicked be shaken out of it? ¹⁴It is changed like clay under the seal, and it is dyed like a garment. ¹⁵Light is withheld from the wicked, and their uplifted arm is broken. ¹⁶“Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? ¹⁷Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? ¹⁸Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare, if you know all this. ¹⁹“Where is the way to the dwelling of light, and where is the place of darkness, ²⁰that you may take it to its territory and that you may discern the paths to its home? ²¹Surely you know, for you were born then, and the number of your days is great! ²²“Have you entered the storehouses of the snow, or have you seen the storehouses of the hail, ²³which I have reserved for the time of trouble, for the day of battle and war? ²⁴What is the way to the place where the light is distributed, or where the east wind is scattered upon the earth?

²⁵“Who has cut a channel for the torrents of rain, and a way for the thunderbolt, ²⁶to bring rain on a land where no one lives, on the desert,

which is empty of human life, ²⁷to satisfy the waste and desolate land, and to make the ground put forth grass? ²⁸“Has the rain a father, or who has begotten the drops of dew? ²⁹From whose womb did the ice come forth, and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of heaven? ³⁰The waters become hard like stone, and the face of the deep is frozen. ³¹“Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades, or loose the cords of Orion? ³²Can you lead forth the Mazzaroth in their season, or can you guide the Bear with its children? ³³Do you know the ordinances of the heavens? Can you establish their rule on the earth? ³⁴“Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, so that a flood of waters may cover you? ³⁵Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go and say to you, ‘Here we are’? ³⁶Who has put wisdom in the inward parts, or given understanding to the mind?³⁷Who has the wisdom to number the clouds? Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens, ³⁸when the dust runs into a mass and the clods cling together? ³⁹“Can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions, ⁴⁰when they crouch in their dens, or lie in wait in their covert? ⁴¹Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food?

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Then Job answered the Lord:

See, I am of small account. What shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but will proceed no further.

New Testament Reading: Mark 10:35-40

³⁵James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” ³⁶And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” ³⁷And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” ³⁸But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” ³⁹They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; ⁴⁰but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

Sermon:

Imagine that you are at a party of some sort. You're minding your own business, tending to your drink and whatnot. But you find yourself getting dragged into conversation with a man there. And you've got to be honest - you don't like this man. He talks too loud and has kind of an angry edge. But you are smiling and nodding and being a nice person. Before you know it, you and the man are the only people in the kitchen.

That's when the man asks you if you'd like to know a secret. He clearly wants to tell you the secret. So you say, "Ok, tell me."

And the man whispers to you that he is a terrorist.

This statement is making you really uncomfortable but you stay in party-mode. You ask some neutral follow-up questions. He answers them completely seriously. No, he has no real ideological agenda. He just loves destroying things. He loves to scare people. There is nothing more beautiful, he says, than creating chaos in a calm community.

At this point, you've had enough. You tell him, flat-out, that you don't believe him. You, sir, are not a terrorist. A terrible conversationalist, maybe. But you aren't buying this terrorist business.

He leans in, too close. His cheeks are flushed red. "If I could prove it to you," he says, "would you come with me?"

You look around the house. There is nothing, you have to concede, more interesting at this party than this conversation.

"Fine," you say. You get your coat and follow the man out the door.

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That's more or less the opening scene of a 1908 novel by GK Chesterton called "The Man Who Was Thursday." ¹ It is considered to be the first

¹ G.K. Chesterton, "The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare." Wordsworth Classics, 1908.

detective novel of the modern era. It is a fantastic read and I am going to shamelessly reveal some significant plot points in this sermon. I'm sorry. You've had 110 years to read it.

In the novel, a man named Gabriel gamely follows a self-proclaimed anarchist through the streets of London and into a secret meeting of bomb-throwing terrorists. They are about to elect the man from the party as the leader of their chapter. Before the vote can take place, however, Gabriel gets to his feet and makes a stirring speech about the virtues of chaos. He is so compelling that the terrorists elect *him* as their leader instead. As their new leader, he is given the code name of Thursday. He will travel to the world council of Terrorism, to take his place alongside six others, each of whom goes by a day of the week.

Here comes the first major twist of the novel – Gabriel is not just an innocent stranger. He is an undercover detective from the Scotland Yard, sent to infiltrate the network and arrest it's leader, the man known only as Sunday. As it happens, Gabriel has been working relentlessly to capture Sunday ever since the Chief Detective of the Scotland Yard gave him that mission. He thinks of it as the defining moment of his professional career: the day the Chief Detective summoned him into a darkened room and told him from the shadows that it was his sole responsibility to find the most dangerous man in the world.

In all of his years of searching, he's never been closer to finding his man.

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Are y'all still with me? I've not forgotten that this is a sermon. I've not forgotten about that other dogged detective, the man named Job.

Did you know that the Book of Job is the oldest book in Bible? It's astonishing really, to consider that before anyone ever put the story of Adam and Eve on papyrus there was this man and all of his questions for God. In a way, it's appropriate. This interrogation at the intersection of suffering and meaning-making is so human. It is, perhaps, the existential itch at the heart of all religion. Why do we hurt so much?

What do we dare hope for beyond that pain? Those are the questions that Job is asking.

Our Scripture reading for today comes from late in the game, the 38th chapter. As I explained earlier, Job has endured nearly every imaginable loss short of death. His family, his fortune, his health, his reputation, all wiped away. And the Bible goes to lengths to be clear that this suffering is not for the greater good – it's not to build Job's character or to shame his enemies. There's no redemptive violence here. There's only an ego-driven debate between God and Satan - a stinking bet to occupy the heavens on a lazy afternoon.

And for a remarkably long time, Job just tries to take it on the chin – to maintain a posture of faithfulness while his world erodes around him like a sand castle at high tide. Even his wife encourages him to curse God but he simply sits in stupefied silence in the dirt.

Until he doesn't. The straight-forward story of Chapters 1 and 2 gives way to the poetry of Chapters 3 through 41. And like most poetry, this part of the book leaves a lot of questions unanswered.

After seven days of silence, with his life and all his losses percolating in his brain like a cancer, he explodes into a long-form poem of rage. "Why did I not die at birth," Job cries, "come forth from the womb and expire? Why was I not buried like a stillborn child...[because] there, the weary are at rest" (3:11, 16-17).

Now Job is surrounded at this point by several friends who are understandably a little bit horrified by this breakdown. I don't know if you've noticed this in the church, but when people are suffering we love to rally around them with cards and casseroles and assurances of prayer. That's *our* part. *Their part* is to keep a stiff upper lip and assure us that they are fine. When people really start to fall apart – start to get angry, for example – we find ourselves off-script and uncomfortable.

So the friends resort to several time-honored strategies to right the ship. One tells Job that he must have sinned to find himself in such a sorry state. Another friend assures him that God will work out his suffering

for good. Another is very Buddhist in his insistence that we cannot understand why we suffer. We must accept it as a mystery.

Note that whatever they actually believe, the friends' comments here primarily serve the interests of their own discomfort. They, like all of us, are deeply invested in the notion of an ordered world. We wish to comfort our friends, yes. But we also wish to shuffle them back into the strike zone of orthodoxy because we can't bear the thought that we too might have to take a long hard look at the darkness.

Happily for us, Job is not having it. He gives exactly zero cares at this point about respectability, orthodoxy, or his friends' feelings. Having heard them out, he directs his anger directly towards God. Let me remind you – I'm reading this from *the Bible*:

I have kept [God's] way and have not turned aside.
I have not departed from the commandment of his lips;
I have treasured in my bosom the words of his mouth.
But [God] stands alone and who can dissuade him?
What he desires, that he does.
For he will complete what he appoints for me;
and many such things are in his mind.
Therefore I am terrified in his presence;
when I consider it, I am in dread of him. (23:11-15)

I don't know about you but I find it amazing to read things like that in our Holy Scriptures. And that was just four verses of a much, much longer complaint. Eventually Job adopts the tone of a lawyer, summoning God to court to justify Job's suffering. Like so many of us who have experienced injustice – Job just wants to hear God admit that what happened there was wrong.

Chesterton – who himself wrote an essay about Job – points out that while so much of the Bible is pre-occupied with the purpose of humans, the Book of Job dares to ask: "What is the purpose of God? Is it worth the sacrifice even of our miserable humanity?"² That question may

² G.K. Chesterton, "The Book of Job." In *Selected Essays*, edited by Dorothy Collins (London: Methuen, 1949). 2.

sound blasphemous to our churchy ears, but it comes straight from the oldest corner of the Scriptures.

Why, you might ask, am I pleased to see Job hurl these angry accusations at God? The answer is that I believe that at its heart, Christianity is about truth-telling.

“If you continue in my word,” Jesus said, “you will know the truth. And the truth will set you free” (John 8:31, NRSV).

There are, of course, many facets to the truth. But one part of the truth is that from the very beginning of our history, before a word of our sacred texts were written, people have been suffering, and people have been angry, and people have been asking why.

If the heart of our faith is telling the truth, it is at odds with our other favorite past time, which is *obscuring* the truth. Burying it under so many layers of niceties and good etiquette and truisms that we start to sound like caricatures of human beings. We do it to protect our understanding of God. We do it to protect ourselves. But it is not in the service of the truth.

That’s why I find relief in the Book of Job and Job himself. It just rings true.

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After many twists, turns, and travels, the secret agent Gabriel finds his way to the heart of darkness, the meeting of the Worldwide Council of Terrorism.³ It is the day he has been imagining for years, his first face-to-face encounter with Sunday. What will he look like? What will he say?

To his surprise, the meeting took place in broad daylight, on the balcony of a hotel. The table was elegant and festive and Sunday sat at it’s head. He was a huge man. Gabriel felt a growing sense of fear as he

³ Chesterton uses the word, “anarchist.” I’ve taken the liberty of using the word terrorist – although it slightly changes the meaning - because of its strong contemporary resonance.

approached, trying to act natural. Whenever Sunday looked at him, he felt as though he were made of glass. After several failed attempts to casually sniff out Sunday's identity, he decides to ask him directly:

"And you," says Gabriel, "what are you?"

What am I? roared the President, and he rose slowly to an incredible height. "You will understand the sea and I shall still be a riddle; you shall know what the stars are, and not know what I am. Since the beginning of the world, all men have hunted me like a wolf...but I have never been caught yet. ⁴

Then Sunday – the most dangerous man in the world – leaps to the balcony railing to make his escape. But not before he reveals one more thing:

He is the Chief of Police. The one who hired Gabriel and gave him his mission from the darkness.

This revelation explodes like one more bomb, bewildering Gabriel and calling into question his entire mission.

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Yes. If you haven't figured it out yet, "The Man Who Was Thursday" is a detective novel about God. It is a meditation on that sneaking suspicion, lurking in the darker corners of our mind, that God is somehow both the detective and the terrorist, both the mender and the destroyer, our greatest ally and our deepest fear.

In spite of all my spoilers – I won't tell you how the novel ends. I'll only say that Gabriel doesn't stop pursuing Sunday. If anything, he chases him even more passionately, with a whole new set of questions.

By cloaking his theological questions in a detective story, Chesterton manages to bring us back into sense of bewilderment and betrayal that the church itself tends to smother in false certainties. But the questions

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, p. 44.

for God can't be contained – they are as old as the world itself. In face of the world as it is, we - like Job - demand an answer.

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The answer that Job receives is today's Scripture passage. Called onto the carpet by Job's furious accusations, God actually shows up in the form of a whirlwind and launches into a series of rhetorical questions for Job that are really a way to detail the majestic features of the world. After highlighting the sun and the stars and the mountains and the sea, he asks Job who *Job* is. Job takes a second to consider this question and concludes that he does not know.⁵ After conceding that he will protest no further, he repents and declares his allegiance to God.

What should we make of this? Is it satisfying at all? Is it even relevant?

If Anderson Cooper had been moderating this conversation between God and Job, he might have said, "That was quite a speech, Your Holiness, but I'm not sure you really answered the question."

And of course, God didn't. God didn't answer it at all. But Job, that dogged detective, takes a deep breath and declares his case closed.

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If you start digging into the commentaries at this point, you will discover a lively debate about the sincerity of Job's response. Is it really possible, some people wonder, for Job to rage and rage against God, receive a non-response, and then declare himself satisfied?

To some scholars, Job is little more than a sullen teenager, saying what needs to be said because there is clearly no other option. "You are God and I am not. I'm sooooo sorry."

I can see the logic in that interpretation, to some extent. It honors the integrity of Job's anger and acknowledges that healing is a long and complex process. But I choose to believe that Job's response to God was

⁵ GK Chesterton, *The Book of Job*, pg. 4.

a sincere one. I believe, in the end, it has less to do with explanations and solutions, and more to do with presence and mystery.

The theologian Peter Rollins introduced me to a term that I had not heard before: “hyper-presence.” We are accustomed to thinking of things as either present or absent. For example, Michael Britt is either here playing the organ or he is not. However, hyper-presence suggests that sometimes a thing *appears* to be absent when in fact it is present in such an enormous way that we cannot conceive of it.

Rollins writes that “God’s presence is always hyper-presence.”⁶ He offers the analogy of a sunken ship in the ocean. While it is true that the ship contains the ocean, it is much *more* true that the ocean contains the ship, in ways that are unfathomable from the perspective of the ship.

I like to think that when holy whirlwind arrived at Job’s doorstep, God wasn’t just present with Job, God was *hyper-present* with Job. I like to think that the curtain parted just enough to give Job a glimpse of the glory of God. Chesterton says that the Book of Job manages to insist that God is a total mystery while also hinting that the secret of God is a bright one. Job was not there when God laid the foundations of the earth, but God casually notes that this was when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy. “One cannot help feeling,” Chesterton wrote, “that they must have had something to shout about.”⁷

Maybe that hint of glory, that sliver of presence, didn’t silence Job, but rather humbled him. Maybe it just brought him peace.

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I like this interpretation because it resonates with my own experience of God’s spirit in the midst of suffering. I talked this spring with an African American minister here in Baltimore City. She was one of hundreds of pastors who marched down North Avenue this past April, during the unrest. They walked arm in arm down the street, past screaming crowds, police in riot gear, smoke and fire.

⁶ Peter Rollins. *How (Not) To Speak Of God*, 2006.

⁷ GK Chesterton. *The Book of Job*, pg. 5.

I asked her what that experience was like and she told me several incredible stories. But the one that most resonates with me was this. She saw a young man standing on the roof of a car. The windows of the car were smashed and he was screaming profanities at the police. He was in a total rage. She walked over to the car and started talking with him. He was incoherent with anger. She gently put her hands on his legs and pulled him off the car. She told me that she never stopped touching him as he cursed and raged against the police. Eventually he grew still and dissolved into tears in her arms. She said a prayer.

Now it is true and important to say that the problems, the injustice, the *indignity* that led that young man to that moment were not addressed, and *are* not addressed. That work remains before us. But it seems equally true to me that there was a healing power in that encounter that transcended the logic of explanations and solutions. I'm only speculating, but I suspect that her courageous presence that night pulled back the curtain - ever-so-slightly - revealing the hyper-present love of God.

Look - it's not satisfying. I'm not saying it is. It's infuriating how unsatisfying it is. We don't have to understand it to sense that it's true. That's another facet of the truth, and Jesus says it will set us free.

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Come to think of it, I'm not sure how likely I would be to worship a God that I could fully comprehend. Because when I consider the world in all its complexity and splendor, I remember how small I really am. I remember the ways I've hurt people, intentionally and unintentionally. I remember when I put the coffee pot in the refrigerator or left the car in neutral in the driveway. I'm reminded of how foolish it is to think that I could tally the good and the bad in my life like some kind of existential accountant. Maybe a God that *I* can comprehend is not the God we need.

Here is the good news, I think, for church people. It's ok to tell the truth. It is, in fact, what we are supposed to do. You don't have to put on a big smile and say that it's all gonna work out in the end because we worship an awesome God. You don't have to pretend that the world we live in is

acceptable, because it's not. We should be angry. We should be working to change it. If you don't have questions for God then you aren't paying attention.

But I would also challenge you to be open to the other end of the equation – that living in the truth opens you to experiences of Jesus that transcend our understanding. Experiences that transcend our suffering even as they acknowledge it – experiences that bring peace. We get glimpses of glory, here and there.

It's embarrassing, almost, when it happens, because it holds no water in a court of law. How could you tell them, anyway, about the time that you walked off into the darkness in sadness, only to be startled, as if for the first time, by the majesty of the stars? How could you tell them – as if you even understand it – about the way that they shout for joy?