

Job 38:4

“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.”

Where Were You When I Laid the Foundations of the Earth?

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Scripture: Job 38:4

Job was an innocent man. The Bible tells us that directly. In the very first verse of the book of Job it says that he was “blameless and upright ... feared God and turned away from evil.” Job was an innocent man, and that’s what makes his story so captivating and at the same time so unsettling. Job was an innocent man and yet in an ill-considered wager with Satan, God allowed Job to suffer unimaginably. His whole household and family were killed, all his possessions were lost, and finally he himself was caused to suffer a devastating disease.

Like most of us, Job was brought up to believe that you get what you deserve in life. So, too, were his good friends, who spend the better part of the story telling Job to repent from the evil he must have done. Job resists. Job knows better. He knows that he is a blameless man. He knows there’s something wrong. Life is supposed to be fair and just, but Job has first-hand evidence that it’s not. Job demands an audience with God. Job demands a trial.

Finally, Job gets his wish. After chapters of suffering God appears. Out of the whirlwind comes God roaring, “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? I will question you, and you shall declare to me.” God turns the tables. God becomes the prosecutor. “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.”

Talk about a conversation stopper. God basically tells Job, “If you’re so smart, where were you when I created the universe?” Before Job can even get a lawyer, God countersues him. God reels off a million things Job can’t possibly know about. God booms at Job, “Do you know the ordinances of the heavens? Can you establish their rule on the earth?” God rants on and on. Poor Job is left worse off than he was before. Job demands justice, but God stonewalls him. Like a moody parent putting an end to the conversation God says, “Well, if you knew what I know, you would understand.”

On the wall at Harvard Divinity School in a room named after the 20th century Biblical scholar Robert Henry Pfeiffer hangs a three piece mosaic. [slide 1] It is the Hebrew for the first half of today’s scripture verse. “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?”

It seems such an unsatisfying way to memorialize Pfeiffer, a man who spent his life studying the Bible. Job challenges God and says that life isn’t fair. God responds with neither compassion nor information. The book of Job seems to say that God works in ways that we cannot understand. Job, who has suffered enormously, is told to suck it up and trust God. Put another way, the book of Job seems to say that God is good and all powerful, but that we are incapable of comprehending the details. We are told to take God’s goodness and God’s power on faith, and that maybe we’ll understand it one day.

The older I get the less patient I become with the idea that we should have the proverbial patience of Job. And, of course, Job didn’t have the patience of Job, either. Perhaps one of the things that most compels us about the book of Job is that we know in our hearts that Job is right. We know for a fact that up front Job was innocent. More than that, we know on a deep human level. We know by our own experience that we don’t always get what we deserve in life. Sometimes we get better than they deserve. But even more disillusioning, every one of us has

experienced harsh realities in life, harsh realities that are hardly our fault, painful realities that cause us to weep, sometimes inconsolably, and leave us searching for answers, and maybe even leave us demanding that God make an accounting to us. We know from our own suffering that Job's complaint rings true.

As we face these bitter moments, are we really left with only the options the book of Job seems to present us? Are we finally left with a detached God who says dismissively, "You're too small and too ignorant to understand?" Maybe not. Even God seems to say as much. After God humbles Job with a high-handed tour of creation, God turns to Job's friends and says, "My wrath is kindled against you ... for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has." God admits that Job was right all along. But we're still missing something. The answer so far remains unsatisfying.

Maybe it will help to look a little more closely at a portion of what God says to Job about creation. [Slide 2] As you can see on the slide, God's words here contain an echo of Genesis.

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? [Slide 3]

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?

"Or who shut in the sea with doors [Slide 4]

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'?

The ancients would have immediately understood something that we easily miss. God's speech goes on in much detail. But even this short bit reveals a story that the ancients would have grasped the meaning of immediately. Creation in the Bible and throughout the ancient lands of Sumer and Akkad and Babylon, creation in ancient times was seen as a battle. God did not start with nothing and make something. Before creation there was something—a dark, formless, watery deep. In all the ancient stories this period before creation was utter chaos and nothing represented the chaos more than the all-encompassing watery deep. In Genesis God separated the waters. God created the earth by separating the waters above the firmament from the waters below the firmament. In the space in between were land, sea and air; sky, sun, moon and constellations. And the water, chaos, was held at bay by doors and windows that allowed just the right amount of rain to fall to keep the sea from rising above the land. The story of Noah, then, is a story of letting creation return very nearly to complete chaos. The ark rode on an air bubble, as it were, between the waters falling from above and rising from below.

But the most important thing the ancients would have understood about this story is that creation, the taming of chaos, was a fierce battle, and it was not once and for all. The fact of the matter is that after creation, after the epic battle, the sea's power for chaos remained. The

Biblical scholar Jon Levenson says in a little book called, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, that while chaos or evil was defeated, the victory was not complete or permanent. Levenson helps us understand, then, the fact that evil continues in the universe. Evil keeps rearing its head and God keeps beating it back, sometimes more thoroughly than others.

When God rehearsed the scenes of creation for Job, God wasn't so much telling Job that creation was perfect and Job just didn't understand it. God was giving Job a blow by blow description of the incredible battle against chaos, a battle with a tenuous and partial victory. Chaos is still a part of the equation, Job would have finally understood. On the other hand, he also would have understood that what God has done in separating chaos and making a place for the created universe was an achievement remarkable beyond imagination.

This ancient view, it seems to me, far more than any other, reflects the reality we all know. There is order in the world. Often hard work and justice are rewarded, often enough that it cannot be random. And yet, in incredibly distressing and painful ways, undeserved bad things often happen. Chaos and evil are not fully contained. That is our reality.

Levenson finds evidence in the Psalms that the ancients thought that God sometimes takes time off for a nap, or a rest like the Sabbath. When the Psalm raises a cry and a plea to God, the Psalmist is praying, trying to wake God up. I'm not too sure about this idea of God sleeping on the job, but I do like the way it casts our relationship with God. In a real sense poor Job spent thirty-something chapters trying to get God's attention. Maybe God was distracted, making bets with Satan. Finally though, Job finally got God's attention and got also a full account of creation, the battle for order over chaos.

I like the idea that in prayer we are urging God on in the fight against chaos. I also like that we have an active part, for alone, God's victory is neither complete nor permanent. Such horrifying events as the Holocaust, then, do not face us with a God who is utterly powerless or who has abandoned us or who doesn't care, but rather a God who sometimes is losing the struggle. It presents us with a God who needs our urging in prayer and who also needs our assistance in the battle with chaos. The bad news is that chaos is a considerable foe, and we will lose more than a few of the battles. The good news is that we and God are in the fight together, and together we can sometimes keep the waters of the dark and formless deep at bay. [Slide 5] In the end I like choice of verse of Pfeiffer's wall. "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the Earth?" Like Job we were not there, but upon hearing God's account of what took place in the battle for creation, like Job we can say, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you." Like Job we can come to appreciate the magnificence of this great creation, but also the reality of evil and chaos, and finally our part in the struggle. Amen.