



From the Pulpit: October 16, 2022

The Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Reverend William A. Evertsberg

Job 41 Selected Verses

The Wizard of Uz, VII: Leviathan

The first verse in the *Book of Job* says, “There was a man named Job who lived in the land of Uz,” so we’ve been preaching this sermon series about a man named Job.

This is the seventh of eight sermons on The Book of Job. The Book of Job has 42 chapters and 12,674 words. Job himself as used about a quarter of those 12,000 words to hector God, badger God, and whine at God for God’s mismanagement of the universe.

*“Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook
or press down its tongue with a cord?*

*Can you put a rope in its nose
or pierce its jaw with a hook?*

*Lay hands on it; think of the battle;
you will not do it again!*

*Who can strip off its outer garment?
Who can penetrate its double coat
of mail?*

*Who can open the doors of its face?
There is terror all around its teeth.
Its back is made of shields in rows,
shut up closely as with a seal.*

*One is so near to another
that no air can come between
them.*

*Its sneezes flash forth light,
and its eyes are like the eyelids of the dawn.*

*From its mouth go flaming torches;
sparks of fire leap out.*

*When it raises itself up the gods are afraid;
at the crashing they are beside themselves.*

*On earth it has no equal,
a creature without fear.*

*It surveys everything that is lofty;
it is king over all that are proud.”*

“This is God’s last crack at convincing Job that the universe is not as badly managed as Well Fargo, and that God Godself is not as dysfunctional a CEO as Logan Roy.”

Finally God Godself speaks. I just read Job Chapter 41. It is the penultimate chapter in the Book. After this speech, everybody for all practical purposes, will shut up. This is God’s last crack at convincing Job that the universe is not as badly managed as Well Fargo, and that God Godself is not as dysfunctional a CEO as Logan Roy. Is this what you expected God to say?

Job asks over and over again, “Why do the righteous suffer?” To answer, finally God pulls out...God pulls out...God pulls out...Behemoth and Leviathan.

Last week I said that in the mythology of the ancient near east—among the peoples of Canaan, Babylon, and Egypt—Behemoth and Leviathan were monsters who symbolized the primordial, demonic powers of chaos which continually threaten to undo the order of the world.

Behemoth is the hippopotamus which mucks about among the reeds of the Nile River, and as you can tell from the meticulous description of the beast in this graphic poetry, Leviathan is the crocodile. Now how is this an answer to Job's pointed, pressing, pertinent plea?

Some crocodiles are 20 feet long. Crocodiles can weigh a ton—literally—2,000 pounds. It has the strongest jaws in the animal kingdom. It can bite down with a force of 3,700 pounds per square inch, or ten times what your friendly neighborhood rottweiler can do.

Plus they're fairly smart. Do you know that crocodiles can talk? Well not like *Lyle, Lyle, Crocodile* can sing, but they can talk to each other. They have 20 different vocalizations. They can say "Happy." They can say "Sad." They can say "Scared." They can say "Warning!" They can say "Come hither, babe!"

Do you remember last week when you promised you wouldn't fire me if I talked about *Jurassic Park* in my sermons? Remember how stunned Chris Pratt is when he finds out the velociraptors are communicating vocally? Today herpetologists are just as surprised about crocodiles.

The crocodile looks prehistoric, and that's because it is. Today it looks a lot like it did 80 million years ago. When you get it right early on your evolutionary path, don't mess around; if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

The crocodile doesn't look like it belongs on earth. It looks alien. This is where the makers of the Sigourney Weaver movies got their idea. Well actually I don't know if that's true, but you see my point.

Michael Crichton said it best in the book *Jurassic Park*: "No wonder people hated reptiles. The stillness, the coldness, the *pace* was all wrong. To be among alligators is to be reminded of a different kind of life, a different kind of world, now vanished from the earth."¹

By the way last week I reminded you that the collective noun for a group of hippos is called a "Bloat." Do you know what a group of crocodiles is called? It's called a "Float." Bloat and Float. Well that's if they're in the water. If they're on land, a group of crocodiles is called a "Bask." Get it?

"God wants to tell
Job that the universe
is not predictable.
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safe. It's stunning,
but it's not safe."

So I'll ask again: how is the crocodile an answer to Job's pointed, pressing, pertinent plea? But you see God's point, right? God wants to tell Job that the universe is not predictable. The universe is not safe. It's stunning, but it's not safe.

You know what's the holiest place in Chicago besides the churches? In my mind, it's the Griffin Halls of an Evolving Planet at the Field Muse-

um. When I lived in the New York metro area, it was the Hall of Biodiversity at the American Museum of Natural History. You will see every conceivable shape, size, and color, and some that are **IN**conceivable. I'm just in awe in places like that. It feels as sacred as this worship space. I seem to hear a voice there like Moses at the burning bush: "Take off your shoes; you're standing on holy ground."

God wants to say, "Job, when I started scattering a leaping, flying, diving zoo across the sprawling expanse of the planet, from the peaks of the Rocky Mountains to the stygian depths of the Mariana Trench, even **I** didn't know what would happen. Even **I** couldn't have predicted the West African slender-snouted crocodile. This pertains also to Hurricane Ian. This pertains to Vesuvius. This pertains to Ebola. This pertains to 9.5 on the Richter Scale."

¹ Michael Crichton, *Jurassic Park* (New York: Knopf, 1990), p. 118.

So the existence of evil—the question “Why do bad things happen to good people?”—is not a **problem** to be **solved**, but a **mystery** to **confound**, and to stay mostly mute before.

Katie and Christine and I are your pastors. We’ll do our best to hear your questions, to understand your dolor, and to share your injuries, but it’s not always easy. God has a lot to answer for.

Tom Long was my preaching professor at Princeton Seminary. When he left Princeton he went to Emory University where Jo Forrest studied. Tom remembers that during his first year as a parish pastor, a disaster happened at another church. At 11:28 on an October morning, while the congregation was singing *Fairest Lord Jesus*, the boiler exploded at the First Baptist Church in Marietta, Ohio. Five people died, including a 30-year-old Sunday School teacher and four teenagers in his class. Fourteen others were injured.

The next Sunday at his own church, Tom was talking to some of his parishioners about how to make sense of such a tragic and early end to those innocent lives, and Tom said, “Well I’ll tell you one thing: I’m glad I’m not the pastor of that church.” One parishioner looked Tom straight in the eye and said, “You **ARE** the pastor of that church.” And so are we all.²

Sometimes the hurt is much smaller, much quieter, less theatrical. When Kathy and Doogie and I were driving to the west coast, we listened to many books, and I think my favorite is Frederick Bachman’s *Anxious People*.

If you’ve read it, you know that one of the characters is Estelle. Estelle is quite old, and also so lonely that in her free time, she attends real estate open houses, not because she wants to buy a house, but just to be with other people.

She arrives at one open house alone, and she tells everybody that her husband Knut is parking the car, but then Knut never shows up, and—spoiler alert—Estelle finally admits to the others that Knut is dead.

“God loves Job,
but the universe is
not made for him.
The universe is not
made for us.”

She tells the others at the open house that when she met Knut, it wasn’t like a love story, at least not the kind she’d read about. Theirs was always more like the story of a child finding the perfect playmate. When Knut touched Estelle, right up until the end, it made her feel like climbing trees or swimming in the lake.

When he died, she cried so hard she couldn’t breathe. She was never quite the same after that. She curled up and never unfurled again. “He was my echo,” she says. “Everything I do is quieter now.”³

I wonder how many times I have listened to someone like Estelle. She never unfurled again. She is quieter now. Her echo is gone.

Sometimes our hurt is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to confound, and to stand silent before. Sometimes there’s not much to say. Only “The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

² Thomas G. Long, *What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011), pp. 38–39.

³ Fredrik Backman, *Anxious People*, trans. Neil Smith (New York: Atria Books, 2019), pp. 248–249.

—Prayers of the People—
The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Eternal God, Creator of heaven and earth,

You are the autumn artist painting the living masterpiece of vibrant colors and golden light outside our doors. As the migrating cranes call to one another overhead, reading the map of glistening rivers and lakes, they sing a soulful song of homecoming. Your fingerprints on every corner of the landscape, a sign that your Spirit is ever near.

Delighting in your glorious canvas, we pause from the fullness of the week. We seek even briefly, to break free of the push and pull that marks each second of the day. We remember the sacred and ordinary moments that mold our hearts with your love and grace: the kindness that comforts, the breathtaking melody that reaches our ears, the warmth and shelter of family and friends, and the joy of discovering new ways of living and being as the people you created us to be.

It is you O Lord, who set the earth on its foundation, you who stretched the universe as a star covered tent, you who makes the water to flow, the grass to flourish, the sun to rise and set; and so we entrust you with our

intercessions, praying for the world and those we love. We name in our hearts those who await healing and strength to endure the trials they face. When illness and loss, injury and discord, grief and unexpected events wear us thin, draw us close to one another and close to you. Make a way for the inbreaking of hope and the breath to say, bless the Lord, O my soul.

The concerns of this world are numerous. We become speechless with the weight of tragedy and injustice. We pray for peace among nations and individuals, especially Russia, Ukraine, Iran, and Afghanistan. We pray for coal miners and their loved ones in Turkey. We pray for the victims of mass shootings in Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Alabama, and California. We pray for the rights of women, children, and those who live in places ruled by tyrants. We pray for the hungry and unhoused as colder weather arrives. We pray for the therapists, doctors, and counselors working tirelessly in the midst of a mental health crisis. These are a small portion of the needs of the world which we bring to you Holy God, who sustains and renews all things. Trusting in your unfailing love and your mercy which endures forever, we join our voices in prayer: Our Father... Amen.

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