



From the Pulpit: October 23, 2022

The Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Reverend William A. Evertsberg

Job 38

The Wizard of Uz, VIII: God

The first verse in *The Book of Job* reads There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. So we've been preaching this sermon series called "The Wizard of Uz", this is the eighth and last sermon of that series.

God has not said a word. Finally God Godself has a chance to speak. And not just **speak**. But **show up**. God appears to Job in a whirlwind, a storm, a hurricane, a tornado. From the whirlwind, God gives Job a 2,000-word crash course in Meteorology, Oceanography, Hydrology, Zoology, Astrology, and Cosmology.

*"Who is this that darkens counsel
by words without knowledge?*

Gird up your loins like a man;

*I will question you, and you
shall declare to me.*

*"Where were you when I laid the
foundation of the earth?*

*Tell me, if you have under-
standing.*

*Who determined its measure-
ments—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

and said, "Thus far shall you come and no farther,

and here shall your proud waves be stopped?"

"The whirlwind is a provisional answer to the question "What is God like?" but it can't be the final answer."

By the way, this is some of the most shimmering nature poetry ever written. Are you looking for some devotional reading? Let me suggest you take Job chapters 38–41 to your holiest landscape. Indiana Dunes? Superior's South Shore? Maybe I'll take it to the pier in Grand Haven at sunset when I go there for Thanksgiving.

Job asks "Why do the righteous suffer?" God says "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Don't you know that I shut in the sea with doors? Don't you know that I chain the stars to their courses? Don't you know that I feed the lion and the raven and the eagle? I give the horse its strength, I cut a channel for the torrents of rain."

In a word, God's answer is "I'm the Creator, I run things around here." I made you, and I can unmake you. I brought you into this world, and I can take you out of it."

The whirlwind is a provisional answer to the question "What is God like?" but it can't be the final answer. For Christians, the ultimate answer comes from outside *The Book of Job*. It comes from the *New Testament*.

Today we come to the last of eight central characters in *The Book of Job*. This is the 38th chapter and almost the last thing that happens in this sprawling book or essay or poem or legal brief, whatever you want to call it.

For 36 chapters Job and his wife and his friends have been talking **about** God and **to** God and **around** God, and except for a brief conversation with The Satan,

Four hundred years later, St. John will tell us that God shows up again, not as a whirlwind, but as a Carpenter from Nazareth. “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. And we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.” Not in a storm does God come, but in a crucified carpenter.

What additional clarification does this new answer bring to the problem of pain? Instead of overruling the world’s evil, God chooses to suffer it. Not to *end* it, or *destroy* it, but to *live* it, to *suffer* it. In Jesus Christ, God chooses to place Godself at the mercy of God’s own creation, bad though it has gone. God does not work by the *love* of *power*, but by the *power* of *love*.¹

A father who lost his son in the Korean War. He asked his minister “Where was God when my son was killed?” And the minister answered, “Just where he was when his own son was killed.”²

Our suffering is God’s suffering. What have we known that God in Jesus has not known before us? All our broken dreams and broken bodies, all our desperate discouragements and most foolish failures, the ills which befall us and the disappointments which defeat us, the betrayals which undo us and the racking anguish which overwhelms us, they are taken up into the heart of God. You can crucify the Christ, but you cannot keep him dead. The world has done its worst, and it has become God’s best.

What does God look like? “Like a terrifying whirlwind,” says Job. What does God look like? “Like the Crucified Christ on the cross,” says St. John.

I need to pay proper homage to one of my heroes. Let me tell you this one story, and then I’ll quit. I have to go back a way. In April of 1981, Kathy graduated from the University of Michigan. In May of 1981, I graduated from Calvin College. In June, we got married. In August, we packed all our earthly belongings into a U-Haul and drove to Princeton, New Jersey. In September, I matriculated at Princeton Theological Seminary.

“In Jesus Christ,
God chooses to
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The day before class started, I made my way to the seminary bookstore in the basement of one of Princeton’s ancient buildings to get my textbooks. When I got there, the place was crawling with my fellow students, but none of them were buying textbooks. They were all snapping up copies of books by an author I’d never heard of, and after they picked up these books, they started reading them right there in the bookstore aisles. They were making traffic jams.

They couldn’t even wait to get home to open them.

Well, their enthusiasm was contagious, so I picked up a couple of those books myself. And when I read them, I was just stunned. I’d never heard anyone write about David or Jesus the way this author was writing.

His name was Frederick Buechner. He changed my preaching career. I quote him more frequently than anyone else who lived after Jesus. Frederick Buechner. Fred died on August 11 at the age of 96. No one’s sad. We’re just celebrating the gift of his life.

Frederick Buechner: Princeton University, Class of 1948. Union Theological Seminary, Class of 1958. Ordained Presbyterian minister. I even met my hero when I was 30 years old.

¹ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Passion for Life*, trans. M.D. Meeks (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), p. 84.

² George Buttrick, *God, Pain, and Evil* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966), pp. 166–67.

Fred was married to Judy Merck, she of the Merck drug empire, so she was richer than God. Frederick Buechner wrote most of his books from their beautiful farmhouse in Rupert, Vermont, a classic New England spread in the southwestern corner of the state. It's surrounded by thousands of acres of forest preserve, the Merck Forest Preserve.

When I was 30 years old and ordained for just a couple of years, I spent a long weekend at a friend's house just down the road from Mr. Buechner's place. Kathy and I traveled there with the other Associate Minister at my first church near Philadelphia, with her and her husband.

My friend and colleague was socially fearless. She would talk to **anybody** about **anything** and ask **anybody** for **anything** she needed.

When it occurred to her that Frederick Buechner was living just up the road from where we were staying, she said, "I'm going to call him." We scoffed. "You're not going to call The Great Frederick Buechner out of the blue!", but dammit it, she did it! His number was in the White Pages in Rupert, Vermont.

So she calls him, and he actually answers the phone, and she tells him he's our hero, and could we meet him for a drink in Manchester or Dorset or Pawlet. When she finished speaking, there was a long silence on the other end of the line, and she was worried she'd offended him, but Frederick Buechner says, "Why don't you come over to my place for a glass of wine?"

So we went. It was like Elvis had invited us to Graceland. It was one of the greatest days of my life, because for a Presbyterian minister, spending an hour with Frederick Buechner is, to change the image, like going backstage at a Taylor Swift concert.

Well, what does all that have to do with Job's pointed, pressing, poignant pertinent plea: Why do the righteous suffer?

“Christianity, on the other hand, ultimately offers no theoretical solution at all. It merely points to the cross and says that, practically speaking, there is no evil so dark and so obscene—not even this—but that God can turn it to good.”³

One time Fred was speculating about the multiplicity of theological attempts to solve the problem of evil, and he comes to the conclusion that in the end none of them amount to much.

There's the free will defense: God leaves human beings free to love and not to love. If we are free to love selflessly, we must also be free to wreak havoc on one another. Chaos ensues. Uvalde ensues. Highland Park ensues. Raleigh ensues.

Christian Science solves the problem of evil by saying that it doesn't really exist; it just an unreal phantom of the finite mortal mind.

Buddhism solves the problem with reincarnation. If your existence is a disaster, you get another chance, and then another, and then another, until it's all over.

Christianity, on the other hand, ultimately offers no theoretical solution at all. It merely points to the cross and says that, practically speaking, there is no evil so dark and so obscene—not even this—but that God can turn it to good.³

³ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 24.

—Prayers of the People—
The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

God we give ourselves over to you in this, our habit of prayer, and we feel the way in which this moment extends beyond into the lifelong conversation that we've been having with you all along.

We admit again, we find ourselves face to face with the powers of this world that are bigger than that which we have control over, and we long to discern your presence and activity in all that befalls us.

We bring mundane and extraordinary to you, Light of Life: the overwhelming joy of new life, in the wild sorrow of unexpected loss, in the push and pull of the office culture which consumes our day, in the unexpected unpredictability of the markets, supply and demand, global politics, the unfolding of far-off war's impact on our daily lives.

Hold our hopes and worries, and spark within us a creative response.
Let us be grounded, anchored, rooted in your indivisible spirit.
Do not let us languish in isolation, friendless, unassisted, abandoned:
be with us and place the comfort of friends
and the surprise of unexpected guests in our midst,
so that we might be renewed in navigating every challenge, test, trial, and trouble.

We find you when we are knit together in community, the common ancestry of a shared humanity binding us across every difference.

And we take refuge in you when the sun and blue-sky of autumn place us under a canopy of trees, wildly alive with orange-red hues, squirrels scampering by burying acorns for winter.

In this we know that we are in your presence.
In this we are astonished by the gifts we are already receiving from you.
In this our spirits are lifted, renewed, awakened.
For this and more we give you thanks.
For this and more we sing our song of praise.
And we ask that you hear us as we join our voices
in the ancient prayer that unites us:
Our Father.... Amen.

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