



From the Pulpit: October 2, 2022

The Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time—New Member Sunday

The Reverend William A. Evertsberg

Job 40:15–24

The Wizard of Uz, VI: Behemoth

“Look at Behemoth,
 which I made just as I made you;
 it eats grass like an ox.
 Its strength is in its loins
 and its power in the muscles of its belly.
 It makes its tail stiff like a cedar;
 the sinews of its thighs are knit
 together.
 Its bones are tubes of bronze,
 its limbs like bars of iron.
 “It is the first of the great acts of
 God;
 only its Maker can approach it
 with the sword.
 For the mountains yield food for it
 where all the wild animals play.
 Under the lotus plants it lies,
 in the covert of the reeds and in
 the marsh.
 The lotus trees cover it for shade;
 the willows of the wadi sur-
 round it.
 Even if the river is turbulent, it is
 not frightened;
 it is confident though Jordan
 rushes against its mouth.
 Can one take it with hooks
 or pierce its nose with a snare?”

At the end of the week I had a chance to take a white-water rafting trip down the Zambesi which promised several world-class rapids, and I was so excited about it. You put in under the spray of Victoria Falls and ride the Zambesi’s rapids down.

“Behemoth and Leviathan were monsters who symbolized the primordial, demonic powers of chaos which continually threaten to undo the order of the world.”

I was excited that is, until the hour-long class they make you sit through before they put you on the raft. It turns out that they’re not afraid you might **drown**. They give you a lifejacket to prevent that, and they give you a helmet so you won’t bang your head against the rocks, but there’s nothing they can do about the crocodiles and the hippos.

As far as I could tell, the rafting class boiled down to this: “If you meet a crocodile or a hippo, you’re on your own. We’ll try to rescue you, but good luck with that!” They told us that in Africa, hippos killed more people than automobiles. I found out that wasn’t true; they were just trying to scare us. It worked.

The Presbyterian Church has a mission hospital in Zambia on the banks of the Zambesi River, and when I was serving my Grand Rapids church, I went on a mission trip to help build a clinic on the hospital grounds.

Well what does that have to do with Job? I’m glad you asked.

Throughout the book which bears his name, Job has been demanding that God explain why an innocent man like himself has become the pitiful laughingstock and pathetic doormat of the known world. Finally God obliges.

Here in the passage I read a moment ago, God takes a stab at convincing Job that the universe isn't the ill-managed, ramshackle house Job thinks it is.

To prove her point though, God points not to the beauty and order of creation, not to puppy dogs and sunsets, but to creation's **disorder** and **consternation**. God shows Job Behemoth and Leviathan.

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 mucked about amongst the reeds of the Nile River. Don't laugh. It's true: the hippo is an herbivore; it doesn't want to eat you like a tiger or a wolf would love to do. As the Bible helpfully points out, "it eats grass like the ox," but in Africa, hippos strike more fear than lions, rhinos, crocodiles, and black mambas.

The hippo is one of God's oddest accomplishments. Eleven feet long, five feet tall, and three thousand pounds, the hippo is of course, an aquatic animal but it can't swim and isn't even all that buoyant, because as the Bible helpfully points out, its limbs are like bronze and its bones iron.

The hippo's closest living relatives are not rhinos or elephants or cattle, but whales and dolphins. The hippo is almost a cetacean. It sleeps underwater, rising to the surface for air every five minutes without waking up and then sinking back to the bottom again. It can run thirty miles an hour.

By the way do you know the collective noun for a group of hippos? A group of hippos is called a 'bloat.' Is that perfect or what? I just love the English language.

But you see the logic of God's argument, right? This is God's one last crack at showing Job that the strange, the ugly, and the chaotic have their place too in a universe which is neither the product of the human imagination, nor intended to serve humanity's every wish.

"These things which you call evil," God wants to tell Job, "are also my creations. "Look at Behemoth, Job, which I made, just as I made you. They are my crea-

tures too. I don't want to **destroy** them; I **control** them; but I don't **destroy** them."

In other words God is not a micro-manager. God steps back to let the creation be, to grow and develop in whatever way it will. God wants not only free human beings, but free rocks, free insects, free salamanders, free electrons even. God wants the winds to be free to blow, the tectonic plates free to heave themselves against each other, even microbes free to invade the blood stream.

God didn't want a **machine**; God wanted a **drama**, and to get a drama, God constructed the world in such a way that in a storm with 10 billion snowflakes no two are alike. There

are 8,500 species of sponges and 1,000,000 different species of insect. Nobody knows how many mollusk species there are; it might be 50,000 or it might be 200,000; who can tell? There are fish that fly, birds that don't, and crabs that climb trees.

There are 20 quadrillion ants in the world; their biomass outweighs all birds and mammals combined.

"God didn't want a machine; God wanted a drama, and to get a drama, God constructed the world in such a way that in a storm with 10 billion snowflakes no two are alike."

I'm from the James Weldon Johnson school of creation theology.

And God stepped out on space.

And God looked around.

And God said, "I'm lonely.

I'll make me a world."

And far as the eye of God could see,

Darkness covered everything

Blacker than a hundred midnights

down in a cypress swamp.

Then God smiled.

And the light broke.

And the darkness rolled up on one side

And the light stood shining on the other.

And God said, "That's good!"

God snatched an infinitesimal singularity and detonated it just to see what would happen. Today that infinitesimal singularity is 93 billion light years across, which is 54 sextillion miles and still unfurling, and then God shaped this goldilocks rock and set it spinning just the right distance from a flaming star, and then God started populating this goldilocks rock with a curious menagerie of leaping, flying, diving beasts, and don't you think even God was surprised when one of them eventually evolved into an narwhal or a pangolin? Even God couldn't have predicted them, and God's still smiling.

You won't fire me if I tell you I love the *Jurassic Park* film franchise, will you? If you think about it, the *Jurassic Park* franchise is a fairly sophisticated exegesis of Job 40–41.

Ian Malcolm (Jeff Goldblum in the movies) is the mathematician who keeps trying to tell the owners of Jurassic Park that you cannot make dinosaurs safe. He says, "You cannot make an animal and not expect it to act alive. To be unpredictable. To escape." He says, "The history of evolution is that life escapes all barriers. Life breaks free. Life expands to new territory. Life finds a way."¹

¹ Michael Crichton, *Jurassic Park* (New York: Knopf, 1990), p. 284, 160.

Life finds a way. That is the way God made this world. Life finds a way. It is not safe. But it is beautiful.

When Job accuses God of mismanagement, and God pulls out the hippopotamus as Exhibit 'A' in God's own defense, God is telling Job that the universe is not engineered for Job's thriving. God loves Job, but the universe is not made for him. The universe is not made for **us**. We get reminded of that when schoolchildren are gunned down in Texas or in Thailand.

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A bunch of you have homes in Naples or in Fort Myers. Katie and I called those folk to find out whether their homes survived the destruction. With a couple of exceptions, most of those homes came through intact. But almost everyone we called told us to pray for their neighbors who live in trailer parks or in more vulnerable homes or who have fewer resources to repair the damage. After something like Hurricane Ian, we realize that the universe was

not engineered for us.

And so the world is not safe, but it is lovely, and it is God's. God steps back to let the creation be. God just lets it be, and grow, and change. God throws rampant, garish color across the meadow, roils the oceans with gargantuan monsters diving down deep, fires the infinite black night with the flicker of flame no matter where you look, and colonizes every muddy swamp with an improbable miscellany of living breathing stuff.

And at the end of the day, I hope my prayer will be, "I was glad to be here in God's dangerous but beautiful world. I was glad to be here." They know that "life is gift, and birth windfall, and just to be here at all is sheer unmerited privilege."² The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

² John Claypool, in a sermon preached at First Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, GA.

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

God you are both hidden and revealed, alive within us. Let your spirit rise up, every breath a prayer. It is that simple: the rise and fall of our bodies, every breath a sign that your spirit draws near.

Even as you are inaccessible, incomprehensible, unnamable, invisible, we ask for a tangible measure of your grace: we are awake to your presence when we experience the delight of falling leaves, each color as breathtaking as the last; or the possibility of joy in our week, every unfolding daily schedule bringing us close to stranger and friend alike; or starlight conversations just after dusk, full of encouraging voices of the ones we love, and the saints of light just beyond the veil. Be our deepest longing. Be our buoy amid the storm. Let our very lives be a kind of prayer: always tuned toward you.

We carry to you the worries and deep ache of our hearts: we pray for those we love, especially those going through myriad hardship. Bind us together, strength for the journey, and let your healing be made known in living room and hospital alike. Be with the nurses and doctors, the wise ones who forge a path forward. Even when death draws near, do not let us be people who lose hope, but instead let us lean on your understanding, your mercy, your eternal song. Be and abide with us O God.

We pray too for the world beyond our own intimate lives, for the places in the world that have been turned upside-down by disaster and injustice. We continue to hold in prayer those who have endured hurricane and flood in Florida and Puerto Rico. We pray for those in Somalia plagued by drought and famine. We pray for the people of Russia and Ukraine, caught in the constant cycles of war, violence, and suffering. Let there be a way through. In all these places, we pray for caregivers trying to feed children amid hardship, and for families caring for the injured, ill and infirm. We name the troubles of the world in this sanctuary, trusting that you will rise up in our midst, and that the power of your peace in this world is possible even amid the world's impossibilities. Help us to see beyond the differences that separate us and free us to collaborate on solutions that unite and make real change.

Hear us O God. Shift in us. Change us. Mold us. Prepare us. Make your way within us. And hear us as we pray: Our Father....Amen.

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