

**“GOD’S WAYS AND OUR WAYS”**

**Job 38:1-17; 34-41; Mark 10:17-31**

**October 18, 2009**

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In the saltwater marshlands on Cumberland Island, just off the coast of Georgia, you can find the breeding ground of large flocks of white ibises. These are beautiful birds with long, curved orange beaks perfectly designed to reach into the holes fiddler crabs dig in the sand, fiddler crabs being the primary staple of the ibises’ diet. As well as their perfectly designed beaks, right above those beaks, adult ibises have special salt-processing glands that collect and excrete salt water from their systems. Otherwise the salt from the fiddler crabs would poison them.

Now if that’s not amazing enough for you all, here’s the good part. Ibis babies, hatchlings, don’t develop these special glands until they are 15 days old. So for the first 14 days after their young arrive, the parents fly inland 15-20 miles every day to freshwater wetlands to find crayfish to feed the babies. Suddenly, on day 15, the parents quit their daily commute and teach the young birds to find fiddler crabs. Just like that. With no calendar, palm pilot, or any other external reminder device. It’s day 15. Let them eat crab! And so it goes from generation to generation, one small miracle of adaptation in this universe, that God, magnificent and mysterious, has wrought.

On October 2nd, I was watching the news, and my eyes filled with tears at a video clip of a filthy, haggard, hollow-eyed young man in American Samoa searching desperately through the wreckage of what had once been his village looking for the body of his two year old child, just one of the nearly 200 presumed dead from the Tsunami that had wreaked pain, havoc, disaster in the Pacific just a few weeks ago.

Scientists have documented evidence of tsunamis stretching back at least to the year 5000B.C.E, the most deadly that we know of being the earthquake and succeeding wave action in the Indian Ocean in 2004, responsible for the death of over 150,000 people from Indonesia, to India, to Somalia. Such awesome and awful power under the seas, again part of the mighty and mysterious universe of our God.

From the 38<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of Job: “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man. I shall question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me if you understand. 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?”

The Book of Job is one of the most difficult of all of scripture. It is subtle; it is complex; in some ways, the book is disjointed, the result of at least two if not more authors working and reworking its content. Finally it is deceptive: on the face of it a story constructed about a completely righteous and innocent man who suffers terrible loss through no fault of his own and who searches for answers to his suffering. How many of you here have heard, have believed that Job is a book about the why of human suffering? I believed that until a few weeks ago. But knowing that I would be speaking about Job today, I have read the entire book start to finish three times over the past weeks and read commentary after commentary. And what I would say now is that the problem of suffering is only the entry point for reading and understanding Job. And it's given to us as an entry point because suffering is something we all care about. Especially what we call innocent suffering. We Christians posit a God of love, a God of good, of justice and the desire for wholeness; but then we have a hard time holding that image of our God over against the hurt we know and see in the world, the pain we all experience at some time in our lives that makes us want to stand with Job, metaphorically if not literally shaking our fist at the Divine One and howling into the darkness: "WHY?" Isn't that true? The problem of suffering, of disaster, of evil sometimes stalking the land unhindered, turns us all, if we are God-believers, into theologians. We want to know to know why; we want to know what; we want answers that will make our lives feel less fragile and out of our control.

This morning's scripture is the first part of God's purported answer to Job's cry of why and how and how much. But before we deal with that answer, we need to backtrack a bit in the story, because God is not the first to pose answers to Job. I don't know how many of you remember this, but before God addresses Job, Job is visited by three friends and one sort-of random walk-through bystander who come and lecture Job about the ways of God while Job is sitting on the ashes of his former home scratching at the bleeding sores of his leprosy with a broken piece of pottery. And if this sounds a little like a bad farce to you, there is much of Job that is written as farce, as caricature to make sure we do not miss either the ironies or problems in the text.

So Job's friends are the first to visit him to "help" him try to understand his plight. Friend One tells him that the world and God work on well-understood rules of fairness, and Job has somewhere grievously sinned, and if Job will but repent whatever awful sin he committed, then God will forgive him and his fortunes will be restored. We, the readers, know from how the story is initially set up that Job is, in fact, blameless, so Friend one's counsel is just plain wrong. Friend two suggests that God is good and therefore all that is happening to Job is part of God's plan, and so a blessing, if Job will but find God's lesson and learn from it. Again, from how the story is constructed from the beginning, thoughtful readers know this answer is nonsense. Friend Three, who is the intellectual of the group, kindly offers that Job is merely confused when he protests his innocence before God. The world is complex and Job is blind to that complexity, and if Job were simply as smart as Friend 3, Job would see the connection between his action and the evil that has befallen him. Again, the answer does not wash. These speeches of the friends roll on and on and on, and the reason I have taken the time to go over them is that these are all

arguments we have heard concerning human suffering. Right? The same arguments that were around 3000 years ago. And both 3000 years ago and now, they are simply unsatisfactory. They project the dimensions of a tidy physical and moral universe where the ways of God are clear and understandable. They are also, unfortunately, wrong, and one might even say cruel.

The speeches of these so-called “friends,” written at length, are meant to be contrasted to God’s response to Job, of which you only heard a tiny bit this morning. God’s words go on for four entire chapters, and I would encourage any of you who are so inclined to pick up your pew Bibles and read them. These words are some of the most powerful and playful of the Bible, a beautiful, stunning, awe-inspiring hymn to the creative genius of a God who is far beyond our imagining, giving to the world everything from hippopotamuses to the starry heavens to leviathan who sports in the deep. But nothing is said about suffering, nothing that answers Job’s why, nothing but a God magnificent, mysterious, totally other from us.

In the end, the book of Job does not offer us two explanations for suffering, the friends’ view and God’s view. Instead what is offered is two understandings of God: first, the God that human beings keep trying to create in their own image, a God of tidy rules and known boundaries and explanations, a God that is finally a projection from earth to heaven and not God at all. Then there’s choice two: the God that is beyond what is beyond, never fully knowable to us, but creative and powerful beyond our fathoming.

So the question of Job becomes finally not, “what is the why of human suffering?” but the even deeper question of whose world do we choose to live in: the world of our imaginations—our limited rules and hopes and understandings, or the world of God’s imagination and power, a world where everything, everything from the hatchling story of the white ibis, to the stunning beauty and wonder of the starry sky, to the perfection of a baby’s fingernails, and again the lion who eats the gazelle, and the still-living planet whose movements can create the dreadful chaos of flood, and earthquake, wild fire and tsunami, and loved ones sick or dead too young or too hard, and a Christ nailed on a cross as a symbol of surpassing love. In God’s loving, terrible, magnificent love, all these are bound together, all these are a part of each other; all these are held whole in the palm of God’s Almighty hand.

We don’t understand it. Despite the wonderful gifts of all our science, or the brilliance of our theology, we will never penetrate God’s mystery, God’s otherness, God’s “no” to being bound by our small notions of what should be. Is it enough for us? I was having a bad day a few weeks ago when a friend e-mailed me the story of the white ibises, and despite my bad day or perhaps because of it, the story made me smile, look up and out, and for a moment, self-absorption vanished and I felt myself one with the web of life that is all creation. I’m not saying here that that will always happen for me or for you or for those you love, but when we live in the world of God, somehow suffering and beauty, devastation and illogical grace are bound together. All of them belong to God and all of them belong to us. And That’s the best we can do for a non-

answer to the magnificent, awe-inspiring, unfathomable ways of the God we love and serve. May that God bless and keep us all. Amen.