

12th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

7 August 2016

The Rev. Dr. Brian C. Wyatt, Pastor

Revelation 1:1-20

My first encounter with the Book of Job was in 10th grade. It was an honors English class, and we had just finished working our way through William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. The reason I remember it so vividly is because reading Faulkner at the start of the school year, I felt certain I was not going to survive that class. Every page, every sentence was a struggle to decipher Faulkner's stream of consciousness

narrative style from the view of three different narrators told without a linear timeline.

So after a night of fervent prayer pleading with the Almighty to please, *please* just let me pass this test, our teacher announced that the next book we were going to read was the biblical book of Job. My sophomoric confidence took over. I went to church. I had passed confirmation class. Some Sundays I even sort of paid attention to the sermon. How challenging could a

Bible story be, especially compared to William Faulkner.

Having now read through Job a few more times since 10th grade, I can say it is a lot of things. It is tragic; it is sarcastic; it is sometimes humorous; it is deeply touching and evocative; it wrestles with some of the most fundamental questions of life and human suffering. But one word I would not use to describe it is "easy."

In case you aren't familiar with the story, the nutshell version is this: Job is a wealthy man living in a land called Uz with his large family and extensive flocks. He is "blameless" and

"upright," always careful to avoid doing evil (1:1). One day, Satan ("the Adversary") appears before God in heaven. God boasts to Satan about Job's goodness, but Satan argues that Job is only good because God has blessed him abundantly. Satan asks for permission to punish Job, arguing that if Job has to suffer, he will turn and curse God instead.

In the course of one day, Job receives four messages, each bearing separate news that his livestock, servants, and ten children have all died due to marauding invaders or natural catastrophes. When even that doesn't

convince Job to curse God, Satan begins taking away Job's health. Job's wife and friends all try to intervene with advice, but the real power of the book comes in Job's responses and his own reflections, wondering why God lets the wicked prosper and the innocent suffer. He wants to confront God, but can't physically find God to do so.

The dénouement comes after everyone around Job tries to justify Job's sufferings as God punishing Job for some unknown sin. Finally, God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind, beginning in chapter 38:

Then the Lord answered Job out of the

whirlwind: 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 understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! (38:1-5a)

God's indictment continues through the elements of creation: *Have you commended the morning? Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades, or loose the cords of Orion? And finally, the Lord said to Job, "Shall a faultfinder contend with the*

Almighty? Anyone who argues with God must respond.” (40:1)

The exchange between God and Job continues, until in the final verses, Job answered the Lord: *“I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted...Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know...I **had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you, therefore...I repent in dust and ashes (42:1-6)***

Did you catch what Job confesses in his final words to God? The entire story, all the way up to the final verses, is about Job struggling to

make sense out of the God he had learned about, the God he had been taught throughout his life. Job’s view of God required that he be able to make sense out of the ordering of the universe. To punish sin with suffering and reward virtue with blessing. Part of why Job has endured and resonated with so many people for centuries is because Job’s questions are our questions. Job’s friends articulate our thoughts, our reasoning, our attempts to make God fit into some kind of framework that we can make sense out of.

But the real change, the transformation, that Job’s final words

reveal is not that he has finally made sense of God, not that he finally understands God, but that he **sees** God. ***"I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you."*** Job went from trying to understand God to *experiencing* God.

My last few years of college I was really struggling with faith in God. There were a number of reasons for that, but the bottom line is that I was seriously questioning, doubting, the understanding of God I had grown up with. At the time, I was working a few part time jobs, but one of them was helping with the youth group at a local

Presbyterian church. I ended up accompanying the senior high that summer, as I have done many times since, to the Montreat Youth Conference.

The theme that year, ironically enough, was "Questionable Certainty." It had been an especially hot and dry week, and we were packed into Anderson Auditorium, a space that included 5000 other youth but did not, sadly, include air conditioning. Worship that evening had included a celebration of baptismal remembrance, a lot like the ones we have done here from time to time.

And at the exact point that the liturgist

walked over to the font, and lifted water out of it with her hands, inviting us to remember our own baptisms and give thanks...at that exact moment, it began to rain outside. The rain lasted for no more than a minute. By the time the next group took the stage to read the scripture for the evening, the rain had stopped. But in that moment of baptismal remembrance, the heavens opened up to rain down holy water.

Now if you've ever spent time in the mountains, a brief afternoon rain shower is a pretty common thing. The air always carries moisture, and when that air hits the

mountains, it rises. As it does, it cools off.

Cool air holds less moisture than warm air, so that moisture turns into rain.

Happens a lot in the mountains. Not exactly what I would call a "miracle."

And yet in that brief moment, that short rain shower, that to this day I don't even know if anyone else even noticed, in that moment, I saw God. I *experienced* God. In that moment, it didn't matter what I *believed* about God—my experience of God spoke to me in a way that transcended belief or disbelief. In that moment, I knew that difference to which Job attests in his final

words. I had heard of God with my ears, but in that moment I saw God with my eyes.

Now that experience, that moment of *seeing* God, did not suddenly transform my doubt into faith. The God I had grown up learning about did not instantly click into place for me. In fact, in the 20 plus years since then I have found less and less meaning in that view of God I grew up with.

But what I did find in that experience, and have been reminded of in the precious few like it over the years, is that being Christian isn't primarily about having a correct theology by getting our beliefs right. It is about a

deepening relationship with God as known especially in Jesus.

Acts 17 tells the story of Paul standing in front of the Areopagus in Athens addressing a crowd of people who claimed different religions or no religions, but who certainly did not think the same way about God. And Paul begins to talk with them about the God that he knows and has experienced in Jesus Christ. And he says, "indeed [God] is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being." (17:27-28)

I think we often endure, and cause, a lot of pain and brokenness trying to make sure other

people believe in the same understanding of God that we have, that they read the Bible and come away with the same theology, the same perspective on faith and the world and how God works. But the longer I spend studying this book, reading it, reflecting on it every week, the more I am convinced that it is not about telling us what to believe about God, or even so much about how God works. I think it is the story, the larger story and all the individual stories, of people seeing God, experiencing God, and how that vision changed them.

I hope, I pray, we all have the vision to see God in those moments.

Of course I also hope we don't have to go through quite as much as Job did to get to that place, but we sang a prayer a few minutes ago that God would open the eyes of our hearts, that we might see God. May our eyes be opened to see the God that Paul celebrated, that Job experienced, and that continues to come to us in moments of vision and clarity. Amen.