

## **After the whirlwind (an upside-down world)**

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

20th Sunday after Pentecost - October 17, 2021

Texts: Job 38:1-7, 16-17; Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35c; Mark 10:35-45

Job 38:1-7, 16-17 *The book of Job does not explain the mystery of suffering, but it does speak of faith in the midst of trouble, and a God who is larger than our minds can hold.*

After Job had fully expressed his complaint, God answered him 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! 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? Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?”

RESPONSIVE READING Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35c

Bless the Beloved, who is clothed with honor and majesty, wrapped in light.

You stretch out the heavens like a tent, you set the beams of your chambers on the waters.

**You make the clouds your chariot, you ride on the wings of the wind,  
you make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers.**

You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken.

You clothe it with the deep; the waters stood above the mountains.

**At your rebuke they flee; at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.**

**They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys appointed for them.**

You set a boundary that they may not pass, nor ever again cover the earth.

O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all;

**The earth is full of your creatures. Bless the Beloved, O my soul.**

Mark 10:35-45

*Jesus has plainly demonstrated the significance of littleness. Yet the disciples persist in trying to be bigger than everyone else. Once again, Jesus turns their world upside-down.*

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?”

And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” Keep these words in your heart. The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.

When I planned this day, I named my thoughts, “After the whirlwind (an upside-down world).” I could just as easily have called it, “Be careful what you ask for (or you might get something you didn’t bargain for - like, an upside-down world).”

I lived as a child just east of Buffalo Ridge in southwestern Minnesota. Local legend said the ridge would always deflect tornados from the town. Whenever a tornado siren sounded, I begged to go out and watch - from a safe distance, of course. I yearned to see that finger of funnel cloud reach down and stir the earth into chaos. For some reason, my parents nixed this idea. But as far as I know, our town has never been hit.

When I lived in La Crosse, local legend said a tornado would never strike at the confluence of three rivers - our position exactly. Then on May 22, 2011, the winds suddenly whipped up from nowhere; the sky turned a horrid color, and a moment later the two-story garage right across the street was obliterated from my view by furious rain. We had no warning at all. The siren system had failed. I stood and watched from my living room window, paralyzed with - fear? Awe? Exhilaration? When the wind and rain passed just a few seconds later, that big garage was a pile of kindling. Our house was untouched, except for a bedroom window that had blown inward. The bedroom walls were artistically plastered with fresh green leaves. I got my wish, and I will never ask to see a tornado again. Ours was a mild one, barely more than a whirlwind. The Joplin, Missouri, tornado that same day got all the good press. Fine by me!

Go back and consider Job. Job had lost everything, fields, flocks, and even family, according to the story, because of a bet between God and the Satan (think of Satan here as the prosecuting attorney, not the devil). You’d think Job had a right to complain, to demand to know why. Then God answers Job and describes in glorious imagery the creation of the world. God’s words sound almost arrogant: “Take this, you puny human! Did you think you were the center of the universe, you little whiner? Then think again.” But when you consider the voice is coming essentially from the middle of a tornado-like event, it sounds downright gentle and consoling. So what is God really up to? The story goes on from here, God detailing the incredible beauty and power of the created world, all brought into being by this One Being who now speaks out of the tornado. For the creator, a whirlwind is no more than a whisper. “You asked for an answer?” God says. “Well, here it is: the world I put in place is vaster, wilder and more unpredictable than you can imagine, but I, the Creator of all of it, I have heard you, little as you are, and I’m here with you, for you.”

We'll hear more of this dialogue between Job and God next week (and remember, it ain't over till it's over); for now, the point is, sometimes, like Job, when we ask for something, we get more than we bargained for.

“You don't know what you're asking for!” That's what Jesus warned James and John, when they asked to sit at his right and his left hand when he came into his glory. This, after he had just told the disciples for the third time that he was not bound for glory but doomed to betrayal, suffering, and death at the hands of people who couldn't tolerate his message. What was his message? Among other things, the last will be first, the least will be greatest, the ones at the top of the heap will be thrown down, the ones trampled underfoot will be exalted, the world turned on its head.

Say it again, Jesus! The world will be turned upside-down. This didn't amuse the guys at the top. They thought they could stop the whirlwind by murdering the messenger. We know their plan failed. The wind that swept the world after the events of Good Friday and Easter started slowly but it's still blowing. It's still leveling corrupt regimes and toppling arrogant leaders, just as Jesus promised, slowly but surely. We may not see the effects immediately, but study history for a minute and see for yourself what happens to tyrants.

So where are we little people in this whirlwind? Has your life ever been turned upside-down, as Job's was? Upended by a cruel diagnosis that strikes you without notice - or strikes someone dear to you, which is almost worse? Has the bottom dropped out of your world without warning, leaving you without an income, without support? Have you been overwhelmed by the needs of people you are trying to help, until you just want to go home and hide under the covers?

Or maybe, like me in the tornado, you've watched others' lives be turned to kindling in a moment, and shuddered, and said, “Thank God that wasn't me!” Or maybe you even secretly patted yourself on the back for the healthy lifestyle and strong work ethic that has kept you on top of the heap. (I'm not immune to that sort of self-delusion, myself.) Then the tornado strikes closer to home. Now I think of the 140,000 children in this country who have lost a caregiver parent due to covid. What did they do to deserve the upheaval in their lives? Nothing!

So are these destructive events God's will? Was it God's will that Job should suffer and lose everything but his last shred of life? Is it God's will that children should be orphaned, spouses widowed, lives cut short? NO!! Those disasters are not God's will, not ever. Calamity is more often of our own making than we like to admit. Catastrophes strike indiscriminately, but too often it is the poorest, least powerful, whose lives are most impacted by disasters. Yet God's will is always, ultimately, for our healing and flourishing. This is the way of nature: new growth follows flood and fire. This is even the human way, that we emerge stronger and wiser after the blows we thought we could not survive.

The answer does not lie in structuring our lives to avoid pain. That never works, anyway. Pain is built into life. Pain happens; but suffering is optional; it depends on how we receive the pain. I think of so

many people, some of them in our midst today, who have endured the unendurable, and emerged bigger people, whole and full of love. The last are first, and the least become the greatest in God's realm, under God's reign.

To what can we compare this God, who rides the clouds like a chariot, whose messengers are the winds, and whose ministers are fire? God is like the hurricane, whose center is calm; God is like the fire that purifies as it burns. The great Scottish Presbyterian writer George MacDonald said: "God is like a fire in this - that the farther you are from God's heart, the more it burns." And I once met a missionary embarking for Uganda at the height of the corrupt tyrant Idi Amin's reign of terror. "Aren't you afraid?" I asked. She said, with absolute assurance in her voice, "No, because the safest place to be is always at the center of God's will."

Who ended up on Jesus' right hand and on his left, the positions coveted by James and John? According to Mark (15:27), bandits were crucified on either side when Jesus died. That's all Mark says, but according to Luke, Jesus promises one of them, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." A place was reserved for him in heaven because he recognized Jesus was no ordinary criminal, and no ordinary man. And because he asked, humbly: "Remember me."

Do we dare ask the ruler of heaven and earth, the almighty creator, to remember us, little as we are? Absolutely. You *are* at the center of God's will;\* God is as tenderly attentive to each soul as to the stars and galaxies beyond our reckoning. We are part of the universe and the universe is part of us.

But be careful what you ask for - you may get more than you bargained for!

\*I love the quote, variously attributed, "God is a sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.

### **Prayers**

God of the whirlwind, lead us to your calm center where we are sure of your presence guiding us. Make your way known to our Session leaders this afternoon as we look toward your future.

~God of all generations, from the least to the greatest, help us entrust the past to your mercy, the future to your wisdom, and the present to your love. Help us to be stewards of the tradition that nurtured us, prophets of a worthwhile future, and servants to one another today.

~God of abundance, we pray for favorable weather as harvest continues; as cold moves in, give us a heart of compassion for those who lack shelter, food, or comfort. Teach us to share what you have given us with those less favored by life than we are.

~God of healing, we have lived under this pandemic for so long; help us do everything in our power to stop its spread and relieve the burden on our health care workers. Close to my heart this morning are all the children whose lives were upended when they lost a parent to covid. May we remember all children are your children, and so are ours to care for as well.

~And still, you have given us partners, friends, and family who are especially dear: we name them now and hold them in your light. Comfort those who mourn. Assure them, and us, that death is not extinguishing the light, but putting out the lamp because the dawn has come. In the name of the true light who came into the world that we might have love, joy, peace and compassion we pray, Our Father and Mother in heaven...