**The Primacy and Mystery of the Word**

**Text: Job 38:4**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

**Reformation Sunday**

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In the darkest days of the Civil War, President Lincoln, desperate for comfort and wisdom, reached for a book. Indeed, he reached for the Good Book. And he opened that Bible to the Book of Job. Mr. Lincoln, who was “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief,” probably found comfort in reading of Job’s troubles. After all, misery loves company. And when you’re bearing heavy burdens, there is comfort in being reminded that suffering is inevitable in this life. But perhaps the President found the greatest comfort not in Job’s anguish, but in God’s answer.

What God told Job, and what Lincoln in turn told the nation, is this: God really is in charge.

Not that *everything* that happens is God’s will. After all, it was Satan who was *directly* responsible for Job’s suffering. But the closing chapters of Job make it clear that God is *ultimately* in charge, that history is unfolding in at least a *general* pattern that reflects God’s will, and if there are eddys and backwaters that run counter to the ever flowing stream of God’s justice, the great river itself is flowing inexorably down to the sea of righteousness.

However, God has to use some tough love and tough language to convince Job and his critics that this is so. And that tough language begins in chapter 38, from which Jackie read a few minutes ago. God’s Word brings the reassurance that God is ultimately in charge, but the ways in which Providence is guiding the flow of history are shrouded in mystery.

Yes, there’s some *tough* language in the 38th chapter of Job. The Lord isn’t messing around with these guys. But let’s be clear that God’s words aren’t just directed at Job. In fact, what God says in today’s scripture may not even be *primarily* directed at Job. More likely, these words are directed at a new character, named Elihu. Last week we talked about Job’s 3 friends: how they try to comfort him, but instead they falsely accuse him of bringing all this suffering upon himself. Well, there’s a fourth character who’s been listening in on the conversation between Job and his friends. This fellow Elihu is much younger than Job and the others, and he figures that his place is to listen to the wisdom of his elders. But as they go back and forth, the friends accusing Job of being a sinner and Job protesting his innocence and demanding answers from God, Elihu concludes that, in fact, these old guys have no wisdom. So this young whipper-snapper decides that it’s up to him to set them straight. There follows 6 chapters in which Elihu defends God and levels a scathing critique at Job and his friends. And some of what he says is admirable. But the way in which he says it reeks of arrogance. He says, “Truly my words are not false, *for one who is perfect in knowledge is with you*” (Job 36:4).

Did you hear that? Elihu thinks he’s perfect in knowledge! This guy is not only *acting* like a know-it-all, he actually believes that he *is* one! Reminds me of a guy that I knew in seminary. The dude was *brilliant*; and he let everyone know it. Sometimes the truth of one’s words can be overridden by the arrogance of one’s character. Only God knows it all.

Elihu concludes his preaching with chapter 37, which is immediately followed by God’s answer in chapter 38. Which has led at least one scholar to suggest that God’s answer is directed at Elihu, not Job. Yes, chapter 38 begins by saying, “Then the Lord answered *Job*” (Job 38:1), but this book went through so much editing before it obtained its present form that some late editor might have scribbled that introduction to chapters 38 and 39 by mistake. Chapters 40 and 41 contain another response of God to Job, which is not quite as tough as the response in chapters 38 and 39. So it makes some sense to think that the slightly more gentle response in chapters 40 and 41 is directed at Job who has suffered so, while the hard-hitting response in chapters 38 and 39 is directed at young Elihu, who presumes to know *at least* as much as God knows.

And what a scathing response it is! Put in the vernacular, what God says is something like this:

“Who is this arrogant little snot-head who doesn’t know what he’s talking about? Stand up straight, you puny little man, ‘cause you got some ‘splaining’ to do. Where were you when I created the heavens and the earth? How did I go about doing it? Surely *you* know!” In short, God is saying, “You don’t have a clue; so just shut your mouth.”

Really, really tough words if they’re directed toward long-suffering Job. But if it’s arrogant Elihu that God is talking to, then we’re inclined to cheer God on. Because sometimes the only way to deal with big-mouthed blowhards is to confront them. Like the U.S. Army lawyer who finally took down Senator Joe McCarthy in 1954. Stared him right in the eye on national tv and said, “Have you no sense of decency, Senator? At long last, have you left no sense of decency?”

But what’s really important here is not the pleasure that we might find in Elihu being put in his place. No, what’s really important is the proclamation of God’s Providence; the resounding cord of God’s Sovereignty, the wonder of God’s Word. “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” God asks, and of course it is a rhetorical question because the answer is, “No where!” No one was there but God alone. God laid the foundation of the earth, God *is* the Foundation of the universe, God in God’s wisdom has put the rules in place. And try as we might, we can’t figure out what a lot of those rules are. To some degree, God has revealed them to us. They are revealed in God’s Word; they are revealed especially in God’s Word made flesh who is Jesus Christ. In times of doubt and confusion and depression we, like President Lincoln, turn to the Word for comfort and guidance and understanding. And what we find there helps. What God reveals to us through these words helps. But there is so much more that is shrouded in mystery. And Job 38 doesn’t reveal much of that mystery at all. What we do hear is God saying, “I got this. However much it might appear that everything is falling apart, I got this. Trust me in your times of trouble. Trust me in *all* things. Even when the earth is changing and the mountains are shaking and the waters are foaming…be still, and know that I am God” (see Psalm 46).

 Trusting the Word for strength, looking to the Word for wisdom, learning on the Word, no matter what: these are all themes of the Reformation. When it seemed like the Church was falling apart in the early 16th century, Martin Luther and John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli and the other reformers abandoned bad theology and corrupt leadership and liturgy that was beautiful and comforting but not challenging, and turned instead to the Word. There they found strength in the midst of troubles and a solid foundation with which to confront the powers and principalities of their age.

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.” So God challenges Elihu, and maybe Job, and certainly us. Tough words, to be sure; but words that we need to hear when we fall too deeply into self-pity or climb too high and imagine that we alone have wisdom. Our feeble attempts to understand and explain God, and our arrogant assumption that we somehow know better than God how God operates and who God is, are laughable in the final analysis. Part of the trouble with our nation today is that both sides of the great Red and Blue Divide suffer from such inordinate pride. Folks on the Red side are more likely to invoke the name of God than folks on the Blue side, but voices on both sides seem, like Elihu, to assume that *they* know how the nation and the world and maybe even the universe ought to be run. It’s still arrogance, whether or not you attach the name of God to your particular ideology. It’s the hubris that will not listen, will not bend, and will not admit that the other side might have some wisdom that I can learn from. We’ve become like Job and his friends: arguing past each other and paying little heed to what God might say, to what wisdom the Word might offer, to what the Lord might be doing in the midst of our present troubles.

It’s a rare president who actually takes the Word of God seriously. That’s one thing that made Lincoln so great. It has been said that he was our most theologically informed president. And the wisdom that President Lincoln drew from Job was basically this: God has God’s own agenda; God is in charge; and the purposes of the Almighty, however inscrutable they may be, will ultimately be achieved.

God has God’s own agenda…darn it! I don’t know how many times I’ve figured that if God would just listen to me, the world would be in much better shape. Thank goodness God ignores such foolishness!

God has God’s own agenda, as Lincoln said in his 2nd Inaugural Addres. He notes that both sides in the Civil War “read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other.” And then he says, “The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.” That’s the key line: “The Almighty has His own purposes.” Lincoln understood the Civil War as God’s judgment upon the United States – *both* North and South – for profiting from the sin of slavery. Each great army believed God to be on *their* side, but Lincoln knew that one should seek to be on *God’s* side. Because the Almighty has his own agenda. It’s not your agenda, and it’s not mine. And though we sometimes can’t discern God’s agenda, our job in all times is to *trust* in that agenda; to *trust* in that Power beyond ourselves “whose judgments are true and righteous all together.”

God has God’s own agenda, and God is in charge. Despite all of the evidence to the contrary, God is in charge. You see, when we look at what’s happening in the world, it’s like looking at the back side of an intricate piece of needlework. On the front there’s a beautiful design. But what you see on the back is a bunch of different threads going every which way; a bunch of colors that seem to have no pattern to them whatsoever. That’s kind of how we see reality. But God sees the other side of that needlework. God sees the beautiful pattern that’s emerging. Indeed, God is *creating* that beautiful pattern. We can’t see the intricate design. But we need to trust that God can. The Word *assures* us that God can.

God has God’s own agenda; God is in charge; and the purposes of the Almighty, however inscrutable they may be, will ultimately be achieved. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but someday. Today we know that bad things happen to good people. And it happened again, yesterday, in the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. Now we might get smacked upside the head by some piece of free-floating chaos that doesn’t have a thing to do with God’s will. But we trust that God’s Spirit is still moving over the face of the dark, chaotic waters out of which Creation continues to emerge. We trust that the perfect order of God’s Kingdom continues to come into being, whatever that order might look like.

Which is to say that God is still laying the foundation of the earth. And no, we do not have understanding; at least not nearly as much as we think we have. Job and Elihu were in need of a healthy dose of humility. As are those who hold political or economic power, whatever their philosophical persuasion. As are we.

In the meantime, we can stand on no firmer foundation than the Word of God. Amidst the troubles of this present age, no foundation is more firm than Jesus Christ. Therefore, we will not fear. As Dr. King said, “Evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy a palace and Christ a cross, but that same Christ will rise up and split history into A.D. and B.C., so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by Christ’s name.”

In the dark days leading up to the Civil War, perhaps it was poet James Russell Lowell who put it best:

Though the cause of evil prosper,

yet ‘tis truth alone is strong,

truth forever on the scaffold,

wrong forever on the throne.

Yet that scaffold sways the future,

and behind the dim unknown,

God is standing in the shadow,

keeping watch beside God’s own.

Amen.