**Sermon for June 23, 2024 Job 38:1-11 “The Gift of Perspective”**

The Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: "Who is this that darkens my 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? "Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?— when I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, and said, 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped'?"

The text we have just received is a gift, although it is not a ‘plug and play’, ready right-out-of-the-box kind of gift. The wisdom and practicality of the book of Job are often skimped on by Christians who don’t want to really wade so deep into the morality and ethics at that end of the pool, but this is good stuff, life-altering stuff, even though we are jumping in right at the end of the book today. If nothing else, this writing will offer us the gift of perspective, which is a rare commodity in our troubled age.

Let’s go back a bit for some context: the author introduces Job as an upstanding man who honors God. We read about his large family and prosperous estate, and it becomes clear that Job is wealthy—which makes him a man with everything to lose. The readers are then transported to a ‘heavenly courtroom’ where God is meeting with spiritual beings, among whom is a figure called the *satan*, which in Hebrew means ‘the opposer’ or ‘the adversary’. God presents Job as an admirable and righteous man. But the adversary dismisses this, saying that Job only serves God because of how blessed he is. The opposer is sure that if God stopped treating Job so generously, Job would curse God. The Lord knows that Job’s faithfulness is not based on circumstance, so – and here is the part where most of us bail on this writing - God allows the *satan* to inflict suffering on Job’s life, severely affecting his family, riches, and health.

Okay. Pretty weird. God says go ahead and torture him, he will never curse my name. At this point, things seem spectacularly unfair: why would God allow such a good person to suffer unjustly? Doesn’t God’s reward or punish people based on their *behavior?* And if good people suffer anyway, how can we trust in the fairness of God? We next plod into the exhaustive middle section of the book, full of dense Hebrew poetry, and witness a heated debate between Job and his friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. The most famous of *these*, of course is Bildad, the shortest man in the Bible…because, after all, he is a Shuhite! Anyway, the friends all assume that God orders the world by the principle known as *retributive justice*—if you’re wise and honor God, you will be rewarded with good outcomes, but if you are foolish and dishonor God, you will be punished with harsh circumstances. Unable, as most of us are, to think outside our own mental boxes, the friends conclude that Job must be guilty of wrongdoing. Job defends his integrity, and they go back and forth about this for over thirty long chapters! What did you do? You must have done something! God is just, fair, this must be happening *for a reason*…We will return to a discussion of retributive justice, but for now…

…their debating continues until Job tires of arguing with them and takes his complaints directly to God. This part is shortly before *our* text, which is the beginning of God’s reply. Job accuses God of being against him and guilty of coordinating all the injustices in the world. But then he realizes that can’t be right—God must be fair and all-powerful. But still, Job can’t reconcile why all these terrible things have happened to him, and he demands that God explain himself. A new friend, Elihu, draws a more complex conclusion about why people might suffer. Elihu says that God may not be punishing them. Maybe God uses suffering for warning or building character. Unlike Job’s other friends, Elihu doesn’t claim to *know* why Job is suffering. But he is sure of one thing: Job is not qualified to judge God. Eeesh – that ship has sailed. Too late. And in a surprising turn, God visits Job in a powerful storm and responds to his prayers. A whirlwind of rhetorical questions exposes Job’s lack of understanding. God asks whether or not Job helped him create the cosmos or set the constellations in place. Has he ever awakened the sun or managed the Earth’s weather? Would he like to oversee the world for a day, according to his narrow principle of justice? God’s questions dismantle many of Job’s assumptions about justice, proving that the world is far more complicated than he ever imagined.

By the end of God’s powerful speech, Job is convinced he would not even understand God’s answer. And this leads us to the final scene in the book, where Job, having received the gift of perspective, humbly admits the narrow thinking that led him to accuse God of injustice. He admits that he does not have sufficient knowledge to comprehend or pass judgment on God’s reasoning. But even without full knowledge of how God orders the universe, he can still choose to trust God’s wisdom and good character. And then, the happy ending – of the book, not of this sermon! God restores Job’s losses and defends his character to his friends. God says their understandings of justice were inaccurate and clarifies that Job spoke truthfully about him. Admitting his struggle and continuing to bring his questions to God in prayer was a faithful act from Job, and God is pleased with Job’s humility, honesty, and commitment to receive answers right from the Source.

Let’s take a little break from this whirlwind tour of the book of Job and enjoy a scene from a movie. We will be listening to a great scene from *Notting Hill*, where the world favorite actress Anna Scott (played by Julia Roberts) has inadvertently exposed herself to hundreds of paparazzi after a night of loving restoration in the arms of bookish William (played by Hugh Grant). She has been hiding from the press vultures and apparently has been located through the chatty indiscretions of William’s flat-mate, Spike (played by Rhys Ifans). The themes we have been hearing about are on full display in this scene, which unfolds seconds after Anna has slammed the door in the face of hundreds of flashing cameras and video recorders.

WILLIAM How are you doing? *ANNA How do you think I'm doing?*

WILLIAM I don't know what happened. *ANNA I do. Your furry friend thought he'd make a buck or two telling the papers where I was.*

WILLIAM That's not true. *ANNA Really? The entire British press just woke up this morning and thought 'Hey --I know where Anna Scott is. She's in that house with the blue door in Notting Hill.' And then you go out there in your damned underwear.*

WILLIAM I'm so sorry. *ANNA This is such a mess. I come to you to protect myself against more crappy gossip and now I'm landed in it all over again. For God's sake, I've got a boyfriend.* WILLIAM You do? *ANNA As far as they're concerned, I do. And now tomorrow there'll be pictures of you in every newspapers from here to Timbuktu.*

WILLIAM I know, I know -- but... just -- let's stay calm... *ANNA You can stay calm -- it's the perfect situation for you -- minimum input, maximum publicity. Everyone you ever bump into will know. 'Well done you --you slept with that actress -- we've seen the pictures.'*

WILLIAM That's spectacularly unfair. *ANNA Who knows, it may even help business. Buy a boring book about Egypt from the guy who slept with Anna Scott.*

WILLIAM Now stop. Stop. I beg you -- calm down. Have a cup of tea. *ANNA I don't want a damn cup of tea. I want to go home.*  WILLIAM Just wait a minute... this is crazy behavior. Can't we just laugh about this? Seriously -- in the huge sweep of things, this stuff doesn't matter. *ANNA What will you say next, that there are people starving in the Sudan?*  WILLIAM Well, there are. And we don't need to go anywhere near that far. My best friend slipped -- she slipped down-stairs, cracked her back and she's in a wheelchair for the rest of her life. All I'm asking for is a normal amount of perspective.

*ANNA You're right: of course, you're right. It's just that I've dealt with this garbage for ten years now -- you've had it for ten minutes. Our perspectives are different.*

WILLIAM I mean -- today's newspapers will be lining tomorrow's waste paper bins.

*ANNA Excuse me?*  WILLIAM Well, you know -- it's just one day. Today's papers will all have been thrown away tomorrow. *ANNA You really don't get it. This story gets filed. Every time anyone writes anything about me -- they'll dig up these photos. Newspapers last forever. I'll regret staying here last night forever.* WILLIAM Right. Fine! I will do the opposite, if it's all right by you -- and always be glad you came. But you're right -- you probably better go.

This scene haunted me as I pondered about the difference between our perspective and God’s perspective, and how most of us are like poor William, not understanding all the moving parts that are in play in Life. I quoted his line earlier about things being spectacularly unfair because that is exactly where we will end up, exactly where Job’s three accusatory friends ended up, if we continue to think that the way we sort things out and the way God sorts things out are the same. The three friends, and the vast majority of humanity, think that God is like us, and desires retributive justice, which we finally are going to talk about!

Quoting Wikipedia: *Retributive justice is a legal concept whereby the criminal offender receives punishment proportional or similar to the*[*crime*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crime)*. As opposed to*[*revenge*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revenge)*, retributive justice is not personal: it is directed only at wrongdoing, has inherent limits, involves no pleasure at the suffering of others, and employs procedural standards. The concept is found in most world cultures and in many ancient texts. The presence of retributive justice in*[*ancient Jewish*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Jewish)*culture is shown by its mention in the*[*law of Moses*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Torah)*, which refers to the punishments of "life for life,*[*eye for eye*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eye_for_an_eye)*, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot" as also attested in the*[*Code of Hammurabi*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Code_of_Hammurabi)*.* This is the worldview of Job’s friends, that God, in order to be fair, must punish fairly. That God, in order to qualify as just, must punish justly. There is no escape from this mental box, for them: if God is just, and Job is being punished, he must have it coming! And this kind of thinking is alive and well, in our courts and in our lawmaking, in our politics and in our perverse efforts at justice. We still discount rape victims and say, ‘well, what did you expect, dressed like that’? We still lump people in groups by skin color and assume that, even if they were innocent *this one time*, there were other things they have already done that surely deserve punishment. We still throw Scripture at LGBTQ brothers and sisters as if they had choices and made choices that volumes of genetic and social research have proved don’t actually exist!

Why are we so obsessed with the punishment fitting the crime? Because we want things to be fair! We don’t want lawbreakers to get away with it! Social theorists feel that retributive justice helps funnel the revengeful sentiments of the public into political and legal systems. The benefit is to deter people from resorting to [lynchings](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lynching), [blood feuds](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blood_feud), and other forms of [vigilante](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vigilante) self-help. Because in all ancient legal systems, retribution for wrongdoing took precedence over the enforcement of individual rights. A sense of [natural law](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natural_law) demanded that a criminal should be punished with similar loss and pain as they inflicted on their victim. Much of this sentiment is a fresh today as it was a thousand years before Jesus, but it still doesn’t get us any closer to God.

And that is because God’s justice, as revealed to us in Jesus Christ, is not based on retribution. It is rooted in *grace*, which sets aside the facts of what we ‘deserve’ and trades them for the healing that might actually do the trick. The ancients, and many, many misguided Christians to this day, worship a retributive God, a God who punishes – fairly, proportionally, but punishes, nevertheless. But we who are under grace have a different perspective, and that is that living a good life *under fear of punishment if you don’t* isn’t much of a good life at all. Folks who take grace seriously are humble and don’t feel like we are ‘getting away’ with anything; but we understand God to operate through healing and forgiveness rather than through wounding and grudge-holding. Folks under grace don’t live their lives to avoid punishment, but rather to embrace reward. Folks under grace know that we didn’t earn this goodness, but it is ours nevertheless, from the limitless pools of God’s mercy and lovingkindness. And finally, folks under grace can worship and adore a blemish-free, reputationally untarnished understanding of God. We don’t worship the serial abuser who is nice most of the time. We worship a God who is Goodness Itself, all of the time. Amen.