

Angry Young Man

Now that I've read to you from the Book of Job, I want to read you some of the wisdom of a much later prophet, specifically, the prophet Joel. Oh, I don't mean that minor prophet of the Old Testament, whose words we usually remember at Pentecost. You know, "'I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions.'" No, this prophet Joel... well, let me read this and see if you can figure it out:

There's a place in the world for the angry young man
With his working class ties and his radical plans
He refuses to bend, he refuses to crawl
He's always at home with his back to the wall
And he's proud of his scars and the battles he's lost
And he struggles and bleeds as he hangs on the cross
And he likes to be known as the angry young man
Give a moment or two to the angry young man
With his foot in his mouth and his heart in his hand
He's been stabbed in the back, he's been misunderstood
It's a comfort to know his intentions are good
And he sits in a room with a lock on the door
With his maps and his medals laid out on the floor
And he likes to be known as the angry young man...
And there's always a place for the angry young man
With his fist in the air and his head in the sand
And he's never been able to learn from mistakes
So he can't understand why his heart always breaks
But his honor is pure and his courage as well
And he's fair and he's true and he's boring as hell
And he'll go to the grave as an angry old man...

The words of the prophet, William Martin Joel, as sung on his album, "Turnstiles," released by Columbia Records in the Year of Our Lord 1976. Thanks be to God.

Ok, Ok, I'm being a little silly this morning but I really can't read the section of Job about Elihu without thinking of the stereotype of the Angry Young Man. The "Angry Young Man" is a stock character in literature, including popular song. In fact, about 18 months after "Turnstiles" came out, the rock group Styx issued their album, "Grand Illusion" which included a song titled "Fooling Yourself." Anybody remember or care to guess the subtitle of that song? That's right, "Angry Young Man." The phrase was first popularized in October of 1957 by George Fearon in the London *Daily Telegraph* in an article about John Osborne and his play "Look Back in Anger." Fearon wrote, "I had read John Osborne's play. When I met the author I ventured to prophesy that his generation would praise his play while mine would, in general, dislike it... 'If this happens,' I told him, 'you would become known as the Angry Young Man.' In fact, we decided then and there that henceforth he was to be known as that." But the Angry Young Man far predates Osborne and his kitchen-sink dramas. If ever there was an archetype of the character, here he is in Job, some 2600 years previous. Incidentally, that's just a guess about when Job was written. Scholars really don't agree about much of anything regarding this book, including when and where it was written. Rabbinic tradition says Moses wrote it, which would make it about a thousand years earlier.

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Some of the many points of contention regarding the Book of Job concern the character of Elihu. Oddly, he is given the most complete description in the book: he is young, he is the son of Barachel from Buz, part of the family of Ram... not that any of that is really helpful, except the “young” part. The more important question is: who is he dramatically? What function does he serve in the story? Are we to find him sympathetic, a surrogate for the narrator to set us straight after the long debate between Job and his friends? Or is he just another part of Job’s suffering, somebody else who comes and puts down the poor sufferer? In the remainder of my time this morning, I want to consider what our basic response might be to Elihu and the primary lessons that I, at least, take from his appearance in this book. Pastor Stephen will be preaching next week and then in the following two weeks my intention is to return to Elihu and his long discourse before wrapping up with some thoughts on the role God plays in this drama and what that means for us. Ready? Here we go...

As I mentioned, some commentators take a positive view of Elihu and his words to Job. They see enough difference between his arguments and those of the three friends to justify this position. Some go so far as to see him as representing a foreshadowing of the Gospel, perhaps even a pre-Bethlehem appearance of the Second Person of the Trinity. They base this on four things. First, they say, Elihu reveals the true nature of God. They point particularly to his words about God in 37:23 (this is from the King James Version): “he is excellent in power, and in judgment, and in plenty of justice: he will not afflict.” In comparison with the three older friends, Elihu is promoting a kinder, gentler picture of God. This leads to the second point of those who would see Elihu as a “type” of Jesus: he is correcting the established religious leaders of the day (the friends) just as Jesus rebuked the scribes, Pharisees, and priests. Not only that, they say, but Elihu even uses words Jesus will later use, words found nowhere else in the Scriptures. In 32:19, Elihu talks about his compulsion to speak his mind before his elders: “My heart is indeed like wine that has no vent; like new wineskins, it is ready to burst.” Those with a positive view of Elihu compare this to Jesus’ teaching in Mark 2:22: “And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.” Finally, they point to Elihu’s mysterious appearance in and disappearance from the story. He is suddenly manifest; speaking as though he’d been listening all along, then seemingly disappears. Surely, they say, this is like a theophany, an appearance of the divine. Additionally, he is not mentioned when God chastises the other three friends in the final chapter. Clearly, he has God’s favor.

Those with the opposite view of Elihu and his long discourse pretty much consider him a younger version of the other three friends: an unhelpful windbag. Most of those on this side have a simple explanation for Elihu’s sudden appearance and disappearance – he was a later addition to the story. The text of Job is notoriously difficult, with odd and ungrammatical bits, including portions where most translators will shrug and say, “Well, we *think* it means this.” Many scholars explain these and other problems by positing that the book was compiled more than written, with different authors and strains of tradition contributing over centuries. Leaving that aside, some point to that previously cited metaphor of the wineskin being revelatory in a way Elihu doesn’t intend. Like a wineskin under pressure, he’s puffed up to breaking point with his own opinions. Remember what Billy Joel sang about the “Angry Young Man”: “But his honor is pure and his courage as well / And he's fair and he's true and he's boring as hell...”

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Perhaps most to the point, say those with a negative view of Elihu, just like the three friends, he continues to blame the victim. To be fair, he does this in a slightly different way. Whereas they consistently say that Job must have been guilty of some sin for God to have punished him with the loss of everything, including his health, Elihu castigates Job for his reaction to the tragedies that have befallen him. Elihu hears Job finding fault with God: “You say, ‘I am clean, without transgression; I am pure, and there is no iniquity in me. Look, (God) finds occasions against me, he counts me as his enemy; he puts my feet in the stocks, and watches all my paths.’” Elihu is outraged that Job would charge God with injustice. He says, “For Job has said, ‘I am innocent, and God has taken away my right; in spite of being right I am counted a liar; my wound is incurable, though I am without transgression.’” Ultimately, Elihu condemns Job as a fool and a rebel: “‘Job speaks without knowledge, his words are without insight.’ Would that Job were tried to the limit, because his answers are those of the wicked. For he adds rebellion to his sin; he claps his hands among us, and multiplies his words against God.”

Technically, one must admit that Elihu is right. Job’s words can seem shocking, even blasphemous to a young man like Elihu, full of zeal for God and anxious to establish the truth. But, like many “Angry Young Men,” Elihu lacks a certain leavening of common sense and compassion. In his thoughtful and insightful book, What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith, Thomas G. Long writes, “To think that one could somehow defend God is theologically an act of extreme hubris. If God needs to be defended, God will need a better attorney than I.”

To me, Elihu seems a very poor spokesman for the Loving Creator whose love for humankind was ultimately expressed by Jesus and his willingness to lay down his life for his friends. I’ll come back to my understanding of God’s answer to Job in three weeks but let’s consider a few other things said about God and by Jesus. Look at the verses we used from Psalm 89 for our Call to Worship this morning. Together, we said of God, “Faith and justice are your throne’s foundation. Kindness and truth precede your presence.” Wherever God goes, there is kindness. Perhaps Elihu intends to be kind, at least in the same way as Hamlet says to his mother that “I must be cruel only to be kind.” Of course, Hamlet has just killed Polonius when he says that, so I don’t know that he’s a great exemplar of kindness. God, the Psalmist proclaims, is kind. Elihu, not so much.

If we can be sure about anything regarding Elihu, it’s his anger. But remember what Jesus said: “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.” Elihu’s attitude and behavior doesn’t live up to the standard of Jesus, whether he is right or wrong in his argument. And in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul reminds us that our fight is not against individuals who speak or act wrongly but against systemic evil: “For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

If nothing else, Elihu is guilty of bringing the right message at the wrong time. We can’t forget that the man he is speaking to has just experienced his business failing, all of his children and

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employees being killed, and having his health fail. What Job needs from his friends, and doesn't get, is compassion, not correction. I've said before that Job's friends do the best thing they can do when they come and sit with him in silence for seven days and nights. Had any of them, Elihu included, continued in that source of action, then they could have been rightly regarded as representatives of God, who is with us in our times of grief and loss even though we hear no word. Our proper response to the bereaved is the gift of loving presence, not stumbling theology, no matter how well intended.

Being an Angry Young Man can be exhausting as well as annoying. When I quoted Billy Joel's song earlier, I left out the coda. Do you know it?

"I believe I've passed the age of consciousness and righteous rage
I found that just surviving was a noble fight
I once believed in causes too
I had my pointless point of view
And life went on no matter who was wrong or right"

Well, I'm going to disagree with the prophet William Martin Joel just a bit. Uncontrolled anger is dangerous, yes. We especially shouldn't deploy it against individuals, particularly when they are cast down. But righteous indignation, when it is tempered with love for even our enemies, can still be an important thing in our lives. Remember what Paul wrote to the Ephesians.

There's a blessing by an anonymous Franciscan brother that I think has something to tell us here:

May God bless you with a restless discomfort
about easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships,
so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart.
May God bless you with holy anger
at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,
so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace among all people.
May God bless you with the gift of tears
to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish,
so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.
May God bless you with enough foolishness
to believe that you really can make a difference in this world,
so that you are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.
Thanks be to God. Amen.