

Who Giveth Songs in the Night

“What though my joys and comforts die? I know my Savior liveth!
What though the darkness gather round? Songs in the night he giveth.
No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I’m clinging.
Since love is Lord of heav’n and earth, how can I keep from singing?”

Some of you might think that lovely old hymn an odd accompaniment to a sermon on Job. The music was written by an American Baptist pastor named Robert Lowry, shortly after the Civil War, but when he published this song, he did not take credit for the lyrics. Whether Lowry himself wrote the lyrics, as some have speculated, or whether they come from an anonymous poet, there is no doubt that the author had the book of Job in mind. The ending of the first line of the stanza I just sang, “I know my Savior liveth,” is drawn from Job 19:25: “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth,” a verse that also inspired Jessie Brown Pounds to write the hymn that is number 225 in our Chalice Hymnal, as well as Charles Jennens, the librettist for Handel’s famous “Messiah,” and many others. The source of the ending of the second line, “Songs in the night he giveth,” you just heard me read from Job 35:10.

The fact that this perplexing, difficult, and rather dour book of the Bible should inspire such loved and lasting music points the way to an answer to a question with which I’ve been wrestling for the last few weeks: Why do we still read Job? For some, the reason would be simple: Because it’s in the Bible. Something tells me, though, that would not be a sufficient argument for many in this room. In looking at the two short passages I read this morning and some others, though, I want to offer an alternate argument: we still read Job because it’s beautiful.

The great Russian writer, philosopher, and passionate though heterodox Christian, Fyodor Mikhailovitch Dostoevsky, wrote “Beauty will save the world.” Father Hans Küng, the somewhat controversial Swiss Catholic theologian, still going strong at nearly 91, has written, “Beauty is the good made visible.” The late Rev. Dr. William L. Hendricks, a character well-known to the Boyers and the Scalises, wrote this as the motto of the Center for Religion and the Arts at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary: “When you cannot agree on truth, then lean into goodness and learn from beauty.” I was a student at Southern Seminary in those days. In fact, the formation of the Center for Religion and the Arts was one of the things that sealed my decision to go to Southern in 1984, abandoning a very promising acting and directing career in Houston. In those days, the Center had among its faculty not only Bill Hendricks, but Ragan Courtney, whom you’ve heard me mention many times, teaching drama, Bob Hughes teaching radio and TV production, Mozelle Sherman teaching opera, and even New Testament prof Jim Blevins throwing in a couple of classes on his hobby-horse, Revelation as drama. I took classes from or worked for them all. It was a unique time at Southern, although to my surprise I discovered the other day that the Center still exists and still offers classes. There’s no sign of Bill Hendricks beloved motto on their webpage, however, and I doubt that the professors and students in the program have the same kind of freedom under SBTS president Al Mohler that we were afforded in the 80s under Roy Honeycutt. But I digress...

The French writer, philosopher, and mystic Simone Weil is quoted in a book I recently read by William Dyrness, entitled Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life. Dyrness writes that Weil “argues... that there are three means that God uses to bring us to himself: religious practices, suffering, and beauty. In the West, at least, she says, religious practices and

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suffering no longer function in this way. Their meanings have been debased. “On the other hand,” she notes, “a sense of beauty, although mutilated, distorted, and soiled, remains rooted in the heart of [people] as a powerful incentive. It is present in all the preoccupations of secular life. If it were made true and pure, it would sweep all secular life in a body to the feet of God.”

Ms. Weil’s argument is particularly interesting to me in the way it lines up with the argument of our young friend, Elihu. If you remember the “Angry Young Man,” whom I introduced three weeks ago, he says to Job in 33:14: “For God speaks in one way, and in two, though people do not perceive it. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on mortals, while they slumber on their beds, then he opens their ears, and terrifies them with warnings, that he may turn them aside from their deeds, and keep them from pride, to spare their souls from the Pit, their lives from traversing the River. They are also chastened with pain upon their beds, and with continual strife in their bones, so that their lives loathe bread, and their appetites dainty food.” For Elihu, the path to God is found in visions and suffering. For Simone Weil, it is religious practices, suffering, and beauty. One could argue that they are saying the same thing, since Elihu, for all the faults I outlined previously, is a gifted orator and his words, although not ultimately convincing, are still worth reading if for nothing else than their sheer beauty.

Consider, if you will, the phrase he uses in praise of God with which I started my readings this morning: “But none saith, ‘Where is God my maker, who giveth songs in the night.’” I’ve been using the King James Version of that verse this morning because I think it’s most memorable and it is, after all, the root of the song lyric I subjected you to. But it’s an arresting image and idea even if we substitute modern English for Jacobean. In our NRSV, it’s “Where is God my maker, who gives strength in the night.” In the New English Bible, it’s “Where is God my maker who gives protection by night.” And in the New Jerusalem Bible, it’s “Where is God, my Maker, who makes glad songs ring out at night.” It’s a beautiful, evocative piece of writing that reminds us that God is with us even when things are altogether dark, whether literally or in our spirits.

Elihu also contributes to the profound recitation of the glory of God’s creation which the poet or poets who wrote the book of Job later pick up with words assigned to God Godself. At the end of chapter 36, which I read earlier, and into the first half of chapter 37, Elihu convincingly and beautifully makes the case for the power and glory of God as demonstrated in the thunderstorm. Of course, this being Elihu, his description is part and parcel of his “Angry Young Man” chastisement of Job. Just verses later, at the beginning of chapter 38, God speaks out of the storm or, as most English translations say, “out of the whirlwind,” and, I’d argue, the image shifts to something far more comforting and more profound.

You may think I’m barking up the wrong tree (or perhaps just barking mad) to associate the words of God from the whirlwind as being comforting. Usually, this image is associated with an angry, judgmental God. But let’s consider for a moment the difference between how the Hebrew-speaking original audience of Job would have heard the famous line, “Then Yahweh answered Job out of the whirlwind,” and how we hear it. For those of us who grew up or spent significant time in the Tornado Alley of the southern Midwest, the phrase immediately brings to mind the power and terror of the tornado. For those of you who’ve spent your lives in regions where the weather is less violent, I don’t know that I can adequately express the sense of both mundane routine and stomach-dropping fear that accompanies the blare of the warning siren

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during tornado season. I heard those sirens so often in my years in St. Louis and Louisville that they sometimes came to seem more of a nuisance than a life-saver. I remember being hustled down to the basement furnace room by my worried parents and, in turn, crouching with my children in a bathroom when no basement was available. I've never been close enough to an actual tornado to feel its powerful winds and suction but, once, as a nervy teenager, I lingered outside at home under the sickly yellow-green sky that presages a twister long enough to see, or at least fancy I saw, a funnel cloud in the distance before bolting for safety. I've driven or walked through neighborhoods in the aftermath of a touchdown and seen the incredible destruction. When Connie and I moved to the Crescent Hill neighborhood of Louisville in 1984, when I began my sojourn at Southern Seminary, neighbors pointed out the remaining scars from the Great Tornado of 1974, which had rearranged so many neighborhoods and lives.

In his excellent volume on Job for the "New International Biblical Commentary," Gerald Wilson points out that the Hebrew word used in the Scripture, *se'arah*, does not refer to the tornado but rather to a strong wind in a storm. Again, this is a familiar image to me. The even more common, moderated violence of the thunderstorm in the Midwest and South engenders a different reaction in those who've become accustomed to it. You don't really want to be exposed to the direct power of the storm. My cousin's husband was struck by lightning and killed in such a storm. But seen from the safety of indoors or even from a porch, a thunderstorm can be quite enjoyable. A thunderstorm during the day means to me the opportunity to wonder at the wild beauty of God's creation, while a thunderstorm at night suggests cozy cuddling and sound sleeping. For those of us who grew up with them and respect but don't fear them, a thunderstorm can be profoundly beautiful.

And, indeed, much of what the poet gives God to say in chapters 38-41 could be categorized as displaying the awesome beauty of God's creation. There is God's description of the foundation of our planet: "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?" Somewhere in the deep recesses of my memory is an anthem containing those words. God directs Job's eyes to the stars of heaven, what we would call deep space, which still awe and inspire us: "Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades, or loose the cords of Orion? Can you lead forth the Mazzaroth in their season, or can you guide the Bear with its children?" The NRSV has rendered the Hebrew here both into words we still use and those that are less familiar. We still speak of the Pleiades and Orion. The Mazzaroth are what we would call the twelve signs of the Zodiac, while the Bear... anybody? Ursa Major is the Latin term for the Big Dipper and Ursa, of course, means bear. In turn the poet evokes the wild beauty of the mountain goat, the deer, the wild ass and wild ox, the ostrich and the hawk, all powerful animals outside the control of human beings. The horse is described in language later cribbed by Peter Shaffer for his shattering play, *Equus*: "Its majestic snorting is terrible. It paws violently, exults mightily; it goes out to meet the weapons. It laughs at fear, and is not dismayed; it does not turn back from the sword. Upon it rattle the quiver, the flashing spear, and the javelin. With fierceness and rage it swallows the ground; it cannot stand still at the sound of the trumpet. When the trumpet sounds, it says 'Aha!'" Those of you who know the Shaffer play may remember the recitation by the boy, Alan Strang: "He saith among the trumpets, Ha ha!" Good poets are still stealing from Job.

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There is much in the beauty of God's creation that lifts our hearts, pulls us out of ourselves, and prevents the sort of wallowing in grief that we find Job is stuck in early in the book. In his book, The Art of Biblical Poetry, Robert Alter writes, "God's poem is a demonstration of the energizing power of panoramic vision. Instead of a death wish, it affirms from line to line the splendor and vastness of life, beginning with a cluster of arresting images of the world's creation and going on to God's sustaining of the world in the forces of nature and in the variety of the animal kingdom. Instead of a constant focusing inward toward darkness, this poem progresses through a grand sweeping movement that carries us over the length and breadth of the created world, from sea to sky to the unimaginable recesses where snow and rain are stored, to the lonely wastes and craggy heights where only the grass or the wildest of animals live." When we consider all the worlds God's hands have made, the stars, the rolling thunder, the birds and the beasts... "Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee; how great thou art, how great thou art!"

The evocative power of the great poetry in Job is so deep that it is as if we, the readers, have joined with Job in actually seeing the beauty of all of God's creation laid out before us. And, in seeing the beauty of God's creation, we see the beauty of God. The Elizabethan poet, Sir Philip Sidney, writing about twenty years prior to the translation of the Bible ordered by James I, "points out that Scripture is filled with poetry that figures forth to teach and delight. David's Psalms, he writes, are divine poems that "give a face to God," enabling readers to "see" God coming in majesty, or riding on the waves of the sea..." And so Job says in response to God, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you." For the character Job, and hopefully for the reader as well, it is as if we have entered into the immediate presence of our Loving Creator. Now Job and we have experienced God's presence directly. Job's experience is that unmediated presence of God of which so many mystics have written over the centuries; a life-altering, unforgettable experience. He lays aside his grief and turns to praise. To return to our weather metaphor, I knew a man who had such a mystical experience of the presence of God. He described it as being the most frightened he'd ever felt and being the safest he'd ever felt. He said as someone exposed to a thunderstorm, he felt the immense power which surrounded him, the incredible otherness that confronted him in his smallness, that sense of the infinite against his finitude. But, like a child safely tucked in bed while the storm raged outside, he said, he felt so safe, so loved, that the sensation lingered deep within him many years later.

Likewise, Job. Throughout Job's chapters of complaint, the title character has called on God to come and face him, to answer to Job's charges. When, in fact, God does come to Job, Job's pain and outrage vanish in view, not of God's majesty, but in view of God's beautiful and loving presence. Our NRSV concludes Job's awestruck answer to God with a traditional interpretation of a Hebrew phrase that, like so much of this book, is less than straight-forward: "therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." Two scholars whose works on Job have informed me, Gerald Wilson and Gustavo Gutiérrez, point out that the word "myself" is not in the Hebrew. Gutierrez also delves deeper into the construction of the sentence and follows a colleague in suggesting that Job is not repenting *in* dust and ashes but repenting *of* dust and ashes. Now that he has seen God, in other words, he is rejecting and turning away from mourning and sorrow. The presence of the Living and Loving God has enabled him to return to the joy of life. Job has been reminded that the Creator who takes such care of the wild places and things that have no contact with humankind cares for him, too, even in the midst of his sufferings. As Jesus was to say later, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground

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apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

Rather than continually arguing with the grieving Job, Job’s friends should have anticipated Bill Hendricks: “When you cannot agree on truth, then lean into goodness and learn from beauty.” “Beauty,” as Dostoevsky wrote, “will save the world.” Elihu had the answer and didn’t know it: “But none saith, where is God, my maker, who giveth songs in the night.” Surrounded by the glorious creation of God, enfolded by the unmediated presence of the Spirit of God, how can we keep from singing? God has touched our world with beauty and touches us, too. Let us arise, my friends, and joyfully, joyfully give God our thanks and praise. Amen.