

October 3, 2021 @ Trinity Bixby
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Psalm 8 & Job 38:1-7, 34-41

On the Great Seal of the State of Oklahoma is a Latin phrase that until this week, I had always assumed was the state motto. It reads, “*Labor Omnia Vincit*” – meaning, “Work overcomes all things.” It turns out that, while this phrase is on the seal, there is no official motto for the state.¹ In my home state of Michigan, the state motto appears not just on the seal, but on the flag, too – giving many opportunities to study the Latin phrase and try to decipher it. The Michigan state motto reads, “*Si quaeris peninsulam amoenam, circumspice.*” – “If you seek a beautiful peninsula, look around you.” That last phrase, *circumspice* has stuck with me all these years later – it’s made up of two parts, *circum-* as in circumference (the path around a shape) and *-spice*, which is related to the word *spectare*, to look or survey – or what a spectator does. *Circumspice*. Look around you.

What do you see when you look around yourself? Well, of course, that depends on where you are. Those in the sanctuary this morning will see beautiful banners and stained glass windows, friends and family in robes and street clothes, and symbols of God’s presence with us all. If you’re worshipping online right this moment, if you look around, you will see reminders of where you are – meaningful things from home, perhaps a view from your travels, and reminders of God’s love.

When the psalmist looked around, they saw the heavens above, filled with light, whether from the sun, the moon, or the stars. When they looked into the fields, they saw animals and crops. When they looked into the sea, they saw life teeming there, in the depths and in the shallows. From deep within the psalmist, a question to God bubbled out, a question that sits with us even today: What are human beings, that you think about them? What are human beings that you pay attention to them?

After all, God has created everything, from the bright lights of the heavens to

¹ Although lawmakers have been proposing the English phrase, “In God we Trust” for the past decade.

the ground beneath our feet, to the air we breathe, to the food we eat. And God has given humanity dominion over a great deal of creation – “crowning them with glory and grandeur, letting them rule over God’s handiwork.” Now, when we hear “rule over” we tend to think of some tyrant or dictator, with absolute power over a region. But the Hebrew word used here is not the word for subduing force, or the word for guarding, or even the word for having authority over. Instead, it is a word that means something closer to our “govern” – to establish common ground, setting up systems for mutual benefit. Indeed, when the word is used as a noun instead of a verb, it means a proverb – a story told to offer comparison between two things and thus determine a way forward.

Psalm 8, then, asks the question: What are human beings, that God has given us governance over the planet – to compare our actions to their results, and to help organize the wilderness? There’s a tension in Psalm 8, between God’s awesome power of creation and the strangeness of a part of that creation being responsible for tending and governing another part of it. This tension is revealed through the Psalmist taking a moment to look around themselves, seeing the strange dynamics of human labor achieving order and wonder, but also destroying the natural beauty of the earth in the process. Is it true that work overcomes all? Or if we seek beauty, should we not just look around us? Is there a balance between human achievement and necessary humility?

The Bible offers us a story of a man who had the opportunity to confront God with his perception of injustice. Job was once a wealthy man, but unlike many fabulously wealthy people, Job was also blameless and living a righteous life. Even so, all that Job had was taken away from him – his wealth and his health. For 35 chapters, Job has been kneeling in ashes, trying to treat his sores, and crying out to God to “lift this veil of darkness” from in front of his face. He even uses formal judicial language to issue a version of a subpoena to God – the equivalent of, “God, appear before me – I’m serving you!” Now, I have no idea how you would go about serving a subpoena to God, but that’s essentially what Job has been trying to do. And now, finally, God does appear to Job – in a whirlwind – and starts asking Job

questions that he and all of us can only answer, “No, God, I wasn’t there. No, I didn’t do that. No, I can’t do that. Only you can.” In our text from Job today, I’ve selected only a very few of these questions – they go on for three chapters!

Job, through these questions, is taken from one end of the universe to the other, and then, on a zoology tour of the earth, looking at all the animals, and all the ways they interact together. The constant barrage of questions from God leaves us wondering what God’s purpose is for asking again and again. Is God trying to overwhelm Job? Is God trying to make Job insecure? None of what God asks seem to answer Job’s problems at all, at first glance – and it’s very easy for us, the readers, to get overwhelmed ourselves!

So let’s take a moment, and slow down, take time to look at these carefully. Despite the whirlwind, despite the way that God’s questions seem to be asked in a booming voice, echoing off the pages of scripture, God isn’t asking anything new. God presumes that Job knows the answers to all the questions. After all, throughout Job’s entire ordeal, he’s been faithful, claiming that God is magnificent, holy, just, and so on. Job has still claimed God throughout everything. That’s why Job wants God to appear – Job wants a fair, good trial, and Job trusts God to give that. And now... now, God is taking Job on a journey through creation to show how God is involved in everything.

There are three major threads that run through these questions that God asks: first thread – God has been present, is present, and will be present in the largest and smallest of all things. Second, God sets limits on chaos, but doesn’t remove it entirely. Third, God provides for creation.

Let’s tackle those in the reverse order. God provides for creation. We see this in the questions, “Can you stalk prey for a lioness? Who provides food for the ravens? Who tilts the water jar of heaven onto the parched earth?” God is clearly the one who does these things, and God is the one who is providing for all of creation.

God sets limits on chaos. Or, to put it another way, God defines boundaries. “Who determined the limits of the earth? What supports its foundations?” asks God

in the text. We might hear this as, who put the earth in the goldilocks zone, where we have liquid water, heat and light from the sun, but not too much – just the right amount. After a meteor hits the earth, who set the systems in place to recover from the damage? God is the one who limits the damage, and helps us to repair and heal the earth.

God is present, has been present, and will be present. “Who laid the cornerstone while the stars and the angels sang for joy?” God is saying, “I was at the very beginning, I am now, and I will be for eternity.”

God is asking Job to look around himself, to see God present in the greatest joys of his life, and in the deepest suffering. In the widest plain of waving wheat, in narrowest urban alley, God is present. Job thought he had lost everything, but God is asking him to notice what he still has, and see God’s handiwork even there. True, he lost his fortune and his flocks – but he still has friends and a spouse. He has speech, he has mobility, and no matter how much was lost, he still has God’s love. God loves all, from the greatest lion to the littlest sparrow, from the most beautiful star in the distance, to the depths of the human heart – God loves all of us.

In that love, God is providing for creation. God appears to Job, just as he has been asking, and shows Job just where God is active, what God is doing, has done, and will do. God encourages Job to look outward, to see God at work, providing in the world, instead of narrowly focusing inward and upward. If you seek God, look around you!

So, to sum up: The psalmist has asked, “Why have you given humanity so much?” and Job has asked, “Why have you taken so much from me?” Like a rubberband stretched between two fingers, the tension between these two extremes leads to stability in the center: in this case, a balance between human labor and nature. Our work will never equal God’s – but we are called to be a part of God’s world, exercising wisdom in bringing order from chaos, and finding God’s beauty in the natural world. We can take strength from knowing that God is always with us – and not just with us, but with everyone in the world.

When we look around us, we see God at work in the world. In the people we

meet, and the peace of solitude. In the beauty of the sunrise and the skyscraper. In the rhythm of the streets, and striding through the woods. God's handiwork includes human ingenuity, but humans are not the only way that God acts in the world.

When you see and hear God's Word in all of creation, that's when you can share God's word with others. Sing along to the tune. Mesh with the harmonies of the stars of the heavens – and the depths of the human soul. If you seek God, look around you – for God's work governs us all! Amen.