

Really, God?

Job 38:1-7, 34-41

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Epistemology is the study of knowing. It asks the question: How do we know what we know? And so, the epistemology of God, begs the question, how do we know what we know about God? We can answer that question in multiple ways, infinite really, but one of those ways of knowing about God comes from studying God's Living Word. In the Bible, much of the knowledge we acquire about God comes from observing God's actions. God created the heavens and the earth, Genesis 1:1. Or God So loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, John 3:16. In other words, we learn about God by what God *does*. Additionally, there are times in the Bible when we learn about God based on the description of others, those writing *about* God. This is true of the prophets, who write of a God of justice and righteousness, and of the psalmists who write sweet poetry to a God who's love endures forever, Psalm 136.

And then sometimes, in the Bible we get to learn about God, directly from God. A quote. Sometimes in conversation, as with Moses or Abraham, and sometimes for all to hear, such as after Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan when God bellowed from the heavens, this is my child, in whom I am well pleased. Today's passage is from one of the divine speeches, as they are called in Job, when God responds to Job, on God's terms, after Job cries out in lament.

And so God begins, Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Huh. And then continues, Gird up your loins like a man! Huh.

And then proceeds with one rhetorical question after another and then another. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the Earth?...Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, so that a flood of waters may cover you? Can you send forth lightning?... Huh. Anyone else surprised by any of this? Because I must admit, I am.

Remember where we've been so far in this story. First, we met Job and learned that Job is a good man, I mean a very good man. Blameless even. And revered across the land! He is rich in wealth and rich in children too. A blessed man, a servant of the Lord. Then we learn of a conversation between God and this Satan character. God asks Satan if he knows of Job, and sure enough Satan does, and Satan has a theory on Job too. Satan thinks that Job's devotion and praise of God is merely the result of Job's grand abundance. A fair-weather follower, if you will, but one that would change his tune in the face of hardship and destruction. God disagrees and consents to a test, a trial to prove Satan wrong about Job. The only parameter of this test, per God, is that Job's life be spared. That's it. And so, with God's expressed consent, pain and suffering falls on Job. His livestock, which numbered over 10,000 heads, were struck by lightning bolts. The scripture says blurt to a crisp! And then a tornado stirs, and the house collapses upon Job's children. Job loses everything, his livelihood, his family, his dwelling, everything – even his health. Sores covered Job from the top of his head to the tip of his toe

and they bothered him so much that he used a broken shard of pottery to scratch and scrape at them. Job is just miserable. He went from the top of the world, to absolute rock bottom just like that. His friends come by, only instead of offering compassion or empathy, they are convinced that surly Job must have done something to deserve all of this. As they see it, Job's gotta be getting punished for some transgression. His wife too, feels this same way, like it's all Job's fault, and with her one, single line in the entire story she tells her husband Job to "go curse god and die". Ouch. An ancient insult. Throughout all of this Job cries out, Job laments to God. He brings his suffering to the Lord. And it isn't pretty. It's like this: "Let the day perish on which I was to be born,
And the night *which* said, 'A boy is conceived.'

"May that day be darkness;
Let not God above care for it,
Nor light shine on it. - Job 3:3

and also

"Why did I not die at birth, Come forth from the womb and expire? Job 3:11.

And yet, despite such outbursts, Job goes down in all of history for being an exemplar of patience. We'll get to that in a minute, but for now, I just wanted to give you the context of the story so far to consider as we come now to the divine speech.

So, we've got Job suffering and crying out to God, waiting and waiting for God to draw near to him, to answer his pleas. And then, lo and behold, God does... but with gird up your loins like a man? Seriously? And then the bombardment of rhetorical questions? You ever been in a conversation like that, one where you can't even get a word in edge wise? And the person already knows the answers before even asking the questions, and yet insists on asking the questions anyway? Ugh. Really, God? Not to mention, why would God need to prove anything to Satan in the first place? Why would God be complicit in the death of Job's innocent children?

I guess God's response isn't what I expected, that's all. That gird-up-your-loins-business, it's not what I wanted to hear in my time of need. It's not there, there my beloved child, I am with you in this trial, know that I am here. You are not alone. I love you Job. What about that loving and merciful God we learn about elsewhere in scripture? The God that psalmist sings about, who's love endures forever?

Of course, I know that reveals my own bias, my own theology both about God and about Love. But in trying to relate to our protagonist, this Job character whose story people have been telling since the 6th century, I can't help but wonder if God's response surprised him too.

Perhaps, for Job and for me, that is the point. Not to understand it. Because for all the divine speech is not, what it is, is a reminder of God's all knowingness, and our limitations. Who am I to question God's speech? Who is Job to question God's will?

God's series of unanswerable questions demonstrate God's awesomeness. God speaks of his actions at creation and his continued dominion throughout the universe. God is God of the heavens and the earth, of the wild beasts and the mighty winds.

And it is there that I begin to see that thread of compassion and pastoral care I was seeking from God. You see, this reminder that God is big, and we are small is, actually quite relieving. A grace really. Afterall, a having a powerful God can really come in handy.

In all that awe and wonder that comes from appreciating the enormity of God, as we stand mouths agape over all that God HAS done and IS doing in the world, we must also consider that this ginormous God knows and loves and cares for each of us. Each of us. Afterall, God knew Job and recalled him by name to Satan. Job, this one mere mortal, just like us. His eye is on the sparrow and I know he watches me.

This divine ratio wherein our big, infinite god loves our small finite selves, gives us permission let go of some things, to rely on God, to be open minded for miracles beyond our comprehension, and to simply rest knowing that God is control. We gain perspective when we truly understand this divine ratio, and comfort too. Afterall God, God being bigger than us, certainly means that God is bigger than any of our problems. Bigger than any opponent we'll ever face. For if God for us, then who could ever be against us?

Of course, it might not feel like God is for us, when we are suffering, covered in those sores. But this is that part about the divine understanding that surpasses our own. There are just somethings we do not know. Cannot know. In that space of unknowing, we can only trust God, trust God's will, and trust our own purpose in God's world. This is all a part of the divine mystery of faith. And this is how Job earns that reputation of his.

Patient Job. His patience isn't his silence, because Job surely isn't. But it is found in Job constant demonstration in faith. Even in the depths of suffering, Job doesn't doubt that there is God. Job engages God, in the good times and in the bad, and Friends, I hope you do too. When you are suffering, stricken with grief or struggling with affliction, I hope you like Job, know that you are not alone. I hope you, like Job, pour out yourself to God, in real talk and raw emotion, knowing that God can take it. And I hope you, like Job, see the wisdom in understanding God's grandness and in accepting our own meekness. For there is mercy in all of that.

Faith. Grace. Mercy. Lament. Job has it all. And it isn't even over yet. Pastor Eric will preach to us next weekend about how this ancient story all wraps up. And that's the thing. We may be three weeks into this story THIS time around, but we are really almost 3000 years and 3 weeks into this story, and still we come to it for learning and understanding. This story connects us to our ancient forbearers in faith, and by God's grace, to the future generations of disciples not yet born. Ancient is the question – why do we suffer? And ancient is the lament where are you God? For Job, and for us, God is as distant as the furthest star and yet as near as our very next breaths. Ancient is that promise, and ancient is that assurance. And ancient is the foundation on which you, like Job, can build a life of faith. Trusting God, and having patience, and marveling in awe and wonder in all that god has done and is doing in the world. For that is a divine perspective, and a divine proportion. May it always be so. Amen.

