

Stop, Look, and Listen
22nd Sunday after Pentecost
October 21, 2018
Trinity Bixby
Rev. Lucas Levy Keppel

[Job 38: 1-7, 34-41 \(NLT\)](#)

[Mark 10:35-45 \(ERV\)](#)

I love when the weather turns a bit chilly, as it has the past few weeks. I'm always ready for the chance to wear my jackets and warm clothes, which brings back memories of the year I spent in Nome, Alaska. Just over six years ago, I was beginning my journey, sitting in the Detroit airport and contemplating the many legs ahead of me. That flight would take me from Detroit to Minneapolis, to Seattle, to Anchorage, to Kotzebue, and finally, to Nome. Now, I'd gotten to the airport early, as it's always a good idea to do, and so had a bunch of time with nothing to do once I was past security. Hanging on the wall was a huge Michigan flag, so big that you could actually read the characters in the motto – *Si quaeram peninsulam amoenam, circumspice*. It means, “If you seek a beautiful peninsula, look around.” So – I did look around, and even from the airport, it was a beautiful peninsula.

Later – many, many legs later – we were heading from Anchorage to Kotzebue, and the flight attendant hopped on the intercom: “Thank you for flying Alaska Airlines,” she said, “And welcome to God’s country.” That was the first time I’d heard that expression, and I thought it might be the state motto of Alaska, like *Labor Omnia Vincet* (Work Conquers All) is Oklahoma’s. It’s not – turns out that Alaska means “The Great Land,” and their motto is North to the Future – but it got me thinking. Since then, I’ve heard the expression “God’s country” used in lots of different places – usually, referring to wide open expanses of land.

But why open land? Do we not see God in areas of population density? It’s like, when people get together, God’s not easily seen. As though we need to be away from people. Is God’s presence masked by the freewill and choice that we all have? Is God drowned out by the swirling masses of humanity, in cities and airports? These are questions – questions that are reminiscent of our story from Job today.

For thirty-five chapters, Job has been crying out to God, and finally – finally! – God responds. Job has been asking God to “lift this veil of darkness” from in front of Job’s face. In essence, Job has been trying to serve God – not in the way we usually mean that, but in this case, to serve God a subpoena!¹ I don’t know how you would go about that, but it’s certainly what Job has been trying to do. And now, finally – God does appear to Job – in a whirlwind – and starts asking Job questions that Job 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.” Our little snippet of God’s answer to Job gives you a taste for these questions – and the questions continue for three more chapters, right up to chapter 41.

Through these questions, Job 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 the ways they interact with each other. Whether he’s actually gone on a journey, or it’s just the questions that are leading his mind there, he’s got a very wide breadth of these questions to face – and all with the same answer, no. This constant barrage of questions, as one commentator puts it,² leaves you wondering what God’s purpose is. Is God trying to overwhelm Job? Is God trying to make Job insecure? Another commentator wrote that if Job were the example given of God in Seminary, God would have failed pastoral care 101.³ At first glance, none of these questions seem to answer any of Job’s concerns. It’s really easy to get overwhelmed.

So, let’s take a moment – slow down, take time to look at these carefully. Despite the whirlwind, despite the (we presume) booming voice of God, God isn’t telling Job anything new. Throughout Job’s ordeal, he has claimed that God is magnificent, just, holy, and so on. Job has still claimed God throughout everything. That’s why Job has asked God to appear – because Job wants a good, fair trial, and

¹ Carol Bechtel, *Job and the Life of Faith: wisdom for today’s world*. (Pittsburgh: The Kerygma Program, 2004), 44

² Krish Kandiah, *Paradoxology*. (Westmont: IVP Books, 2017), 99-100, quoted in Scot McKnight, “The Job Paradox,” *Jesus Creed* (Patheos, 2017)

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2017/03/16/the-job-paradox/>

³ Kathryn Schifferdecker, “Commentary on Job 38:1-7.” (St. Paul: WorkingPreacher.org, 2012) https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1456

he trusts God to give that. And now, God takes Job on a journey through creation to show how God is involved in everything.

If we look closely at the questions, we see that there are three threads that run through these questions. First, that God has been present, is present, and will be present in the largest and smallest of all things. Second, that God sets limits on chaos, but doesn't remove it. Third, that God provides for all creation. Let's take a look at these one at a time:

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 in them. Even though Job feels like God has abandoned him, God is actually continuing to provide for him. And God answers Job directly, too – exactly as Job has been asking for. God didn't have to, but God does appear before Job, and brings Job on the tour of creation. God shows Job where God is active, what God is doing, and what God will continue to do. To encourage Job to look outward, to see God at work, providing in the world.

God sets limits on chaos. Another way to put this is God defines boundaries. "Who determined the limits of the earth?," saying the earth should be just this size, and the thin layer of air around it should stretch this far and no further? God. Who determined where the earth formed in its orbital path? God. In the goldilocks-zone, as scientists like to call it, the place where we have abundant liquid water, heat and light from the sun, but not too much – just the right amount. God is the one who sets limits on chaos. Job thought he had lost everything – but truly, Job had not lost everything. He still had life. He still had breath. He still has friends and a spouse. He had his speech and mobility, and he had faith. Not everyone is so lucky. Job has certainly lost a lot – but God has only narrowed the boundaries, not taken everything away. Job has had many options available, though for thirty-five chapters of arguing with his friends and wife, he's been sitting in an ash-pit. Job could have gotten up. But he got so focused on God that he neglected everything and everyone else – his mind was so focused on connecting with God and proving

himself innocent that he wasn't looking for other ways to live, other ways to be in the world. Instead of looking for God around him, Job looked only inward and upward.

God is present, has been present, and will be present. This is evident in the question, "Who laid the cornerstone while the stars and angels sang for joy?" God is reminding Job (and us) that God is here throughout all time. God is present in greatest joy, in deepest suffering. In the widest plain, in the most narrow of alleyways, God is present. You see – everywhere is God's country, if you stop and look around you.

Now, our Gospel lesson from Mark tells us the other half of this equation: that not only do we need to stop and look to find God, but when we do find God, it's important to listen, too. It's not just about finding God around us, but also that listening is important, too. In the Gospel story, James and John are angling to get the best seats at the glorious banquet that they think is coming soon. You can just see these two brothers, called the "sons of Thunder" (I imagine they were loud and pushy, since that's how "sons of Thunder" rings in my mind) – Yes, these sons of Thunder, James and John, go to Jesus and say, "Hey, Jesus, grant us this one thing..." You see, they're waiting for Jesus to say, "OK, sure, you're my friends! Whatever you want." But, no, Jesus responds, "What do you want?" He's canny to their games!

But they continue, nevertheless: "Ok, well, we would like to sit on your right and left hand at the glorious banquet to come." Great. Fine and dandy – except... do you know what this follows in the Bible? It follows Jesus telling them that he's going to be tortured and killed. Yes – Jesus tells them about his upcoming death, and James and John come back with, "Hey, Jesus, we want to be the best, and sit next to you." I don't think they're listening to what Jesus is saying. When he asks them if they're ready to take this same cup, this same baptism, they reply eagerly, "Yup, we're ready!" And Jesus, wise, loving Jesus, has to tell them that they're right, they will take part in the same cup of suffering, in the same baptism of struggle. But even though they do this, who is honored in heaven isn't for Jesus to

say. Following this passage, he tells the disciples once again that it is the ones who serve who will be honored in heaven.

Jesus, you see, is present with the disciples. Jesus is present, just like God is present. Even though he's unhappy with their lack of listening, he's still present with them – with all of them. He's not leaving them for another set of disciples, saying, "Oy, that was the last straw. You haven't listened to me anywhere along the line. I'm going to go find another twelve. Maybe they'll listen to me over in Egypt. Or in Syria. Or in some other area near here. Y'all are done-zo." No, Jesus doesn't do that. Instead, he stays with them, and tries time and time again to get them to listen to what he's saying.

Jesus sets boundaries. He won't tell James, John, or the other disciples, exactly who will be honored in heaven. This gives us wonderful freedom within these boundaries. We can be encouraged to think, "Hey, it might be you! It might be me! It might be my grandchildren, or my great-ancestors!" That freedom gives us an opportunity to choose wisely, to act as God would have us act, to listen for God's guiding voice. Note that Jesus also provides another boundary: Those who serve will be honored. Not those who take for themselves, who puff themselves up and wear the best of bow-ties and top-hats. No... it's those who serve.

Lastly, Jesus provides for the church. These stories were passed on, written down, so that we could have a chance to understand them. Clearly, the disciples in Mark completely miss the point – but that gives us hope that, when we, too, miss the point, God will still provide for us. Jesus has given us a lot to ponder, and helps to guide our actions to be closer to aligning with God's plan for us. Just like the disciples, after Jesus' death and resurrection, finally understand what Jesus was telling them. They finally start telling people who Jesus is, what that means, that God loves you, the Good News is that there is NOT an angry God, but a God who loves you – and you – and you – and everyone.

So, Job tells us to see God around us. Mark tells us to listen to God when we find God. God tells us that God's country isn't just beautiful peninsulas, not just majestic mountains and frozen seas, not just thousands of acres of wavin' wheat and

sweet winds, or even just America – no, God’s country is all the heavens, all the stars, all the planets, all the heavenly host, all the mountains, all the prairies, all the lakes, streams, and oceans. All the people, all the rural areas, all the urban areas, and yes, even all of the suburbs, too.

If we want to see God, we have to stop, look and listen. Whether we’re walking trails through the woods, along the river, or at the Gathering Place. Stop, look, and listen for God in talks with friends. In the stands at sporting events. At school, in church, and even in the shadowy places that are easy to walk on by. Because God is present in it all. Is, has been, and will be. When we look for God, we will start to see God. Then, we need to listen, and try to understand what God is telling us. Even if we don’t get it immediately. Even if, like the disciples, we don’t get it on the first try. Or the second try. Or the third... we still need to listen to what God is saying, and get it, eventually, when the time is right.

St. Francis of Assisi is often quoted as saying, “Preach the Gospel constantly; use words if necessary.” Here’s another take: “God is preaching the Gospel constantly; stop, look and listen to it.

When you see and hear God’s Word in all creation, that’s when you can share God’s Word with others. Sing along to the tune. Mesh with the harmonies of the stars and the depths of the human soul. If you seek the Good God, look around you. Amen.