

Longing for answers (Job 38:1-7, 34-41)

Job experiences awe at God's response, but not necessarily peace.

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Before sending forth the congregation each Sunday, I often pray a blessing, echoing Philippians 4:7, that those present know the peace of God which passes all understanding. Knowledge in the information age is not just power but is often considered the highest good. I offer this prayer to send the faithful out of the sacred space we've just shared together where, I always hope, there has been an encounter with the mystery of God, and into places where what and how much we know determine so much of life's trajectory.

But whenever I encounter God's laundry list of almighty and mysterious works that are meant to show Job just how little he understands of God and God's work in the world, it's not exactly peace that I experience. I'm not sure it's peace that Job experiences, either. There is awe. (I certainly cannot lift my voice to the clouds and command flood waters, nor can I call down lightning.) But peace?

Faith in the Almighty God who surpasses all understanding, the God who created the entire cosmos, can indeed bring peace. And yet when God says this directly to Job, who has come for just a glimpse into the causes of his personal suffering, I am chilled if not outright disappointed in the Almighty. In reminding Job of his place, which is not God, God seems to forget that humans long for answers. They long for

understanding, to make sense of it all. The German Jesuit Karl Rahner beautifully acknowledges that decidedly human pull toward an infinitely receding horizon. So why doesn't God? Why doesn't the Almighty, in whom this pull originates?

The simple answer is that this story is penned not by the hand of God but by the hand or hands of human beings who have been reminding us for thousands of years that there are mysteries to life, and especially to a life of faith, that we simply can not comprehend.

I've always been a bit wary of that pat answer, that some things are too mysterious for the human mind. Too often it has been used at best to avoid hard questions and at worst to justify bad behavior.

What strikes me about this text is that Job, who starts out as a faithful man, doesn't turn his back or even throw a few choice words at the Almighty. Job goes directly to God, after hearing from everyone else their ideas as to why he suffers. And God responds. God speaks to Job in his heart, reminds him that pat answers (such as Job's friends have given him) are not the way of God. God speaks of power that Job cannot begin to understand, a power that laid the foundations of the earth that Job and his friends walk upon.

Job doesn't lose his faith when he doesn't get direct answers. Instead it is deepened.

Making meaning out of suffering, our own or that of others, isn't the same as achieving comprehension. I know that for some people, hearing that God is simply God and not an oracle of clear answers is cold comfort.

But I imagine that when God speaks to Job, it is because Job is deep in faithful prayer. Those are the times I hear a clear voice seemingly from the eternally receding horizon, words for a page such as this, that cannot be my own, even though they come from within. In those moments—the ones I recognize as my deepest moments of faith—I acknowledge the mystery at the heart of me, something that doesn't only defy compression but comes from the source of comprehension itself. And those moments are moments of profound peace.