

“Behemoth and Leviathan?” Sermon by Emily Rose Proctor
October 25, 2015 – 22nd Sunday after Pentecost, Heritage Sunday
First Presbyterian Church in Marianna, FL

Two weeks ago, we heard Job’s lament about God’s seeming absence and took comfort in the fact that it mirrored Jesus’ own cry from the cross. Today, we hear God’s response to Job. It was too long to read all of it out loud, but I encourage you to go back and read all of Job, chapters 38-41.

I tried to pull enough to give you a sense of the whole thing, focusing on the 2nd half of God’s speech, in which he talks about 2 mythical beasts, Behemoth and Leviathan.

Unfortunately I chose my preaching text for this week before I knew that today would also be Heritage Sunday, complete with bagpipes and tartans. At first, I thought maybe I could make a connection between the sea monster Leviathan and the Scottish legend, the Loch Ness Monster, but I think that’s stretching it a bit.

But maybe Job isn’t such a crazy book to preach on for heritage Sunday; after all the question, “Why is there so much seemingly unnecessary and undeserved suffering in the world?” is a question that our ancestors have been asking ever since the idea of an omnipotent God coexisted with the reality of a just or loving one.

The meaning of God’s response to Job is hotly debated, in part because it is so strange. Who are Behemoth and Leviathan, and why are they such a significant part of God’s response to Job? Are they supposed to be descriptions of real animals like the hippopotamus and the crocodile? Or are they mythical symbolic creatures representing the forces of selfish desire and chaos that run rampant in our world?

Listen now for the word of God.

Job 38:1-11; 40:15-19; 41:1-5, 10-15, 31-34

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:

“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.

Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it? 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?

“Or who shut in the sea with doors
when it burst out from the womb?
[Where were you] when I made the clouds its garment,
and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed bounds for it, and
set bars and doors, and said, ‘Thus far shall you come,
and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped’?

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“Look at Behemoth, [beast of the land],
which I made just as I made you;
it eats grass like an ox. Its strength is in its loins,
and its power in the muscles of its belly.
It makes its tail stiff like a cedar;
the sinews of its thighs are knit together.
Its bones are tubes of bronze, its limbs like bars of iron.
“It is the first of the great acts of God—
only its Maker can approach it with the sword.

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“Can you draw out Leviathan, [beast of the sea], with a fishhook,
or press down its tongue with a cord?
Can you put a rope in its nose, or pierce its jaw with a hook?
Will it make many supplications to you?
Will it speak soft words to you?
Will it make a covenant with you
to be taken as your servant forever?
Will you play with it as with a bird,
or will you put it on leash for your girls?
No one is so fierce as to dare to stir it up.
Who can stand before it?

Who can confront it and be safe? —under the whole heaven, who?
“I will not keep silence concerning its limbs, or its mighty strength,
or its splendid frame. Who can strip off its outer garment?
Who can penetrate its double coat of mail?
Who can open the doors of its face?
There is terror all around its teeth.
Its back is made of shields in rows, shut up closely as with a seal.

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It makes the deep boil like a pot;
it makes the sea like a pot of ointment.
It leaves a shining wake behind it;
one would think the deep to be white-haired.
On earth it has no equal, a creature without fear.
It surveys everything that is lofty; it is king over all that are proud.”

Here ends the first reading. And now I feel like I should introduce the
gospel lesson with, “And now for something completely different. Or is
it? Listen again for the Word of God.

Mark 10:46-52

As [Jesus] and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside.

When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say,

“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Many sternly ordered him to be quiet,

but he cried out even more loudly,

“Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.”

And they called the blind man, saying to him,

“Take heart; get up, he is calling you.”

So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.

Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?”

The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.”

Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.”

Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

[Sit down for anthem]

A lot hangs on our interpretation of God’s response to Job. A lot of people have lost their faith because they could not get a satisfactory answer to Job’s questions.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, who wrote the book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, more recently wrote a commentary on Job, called *When Bad Things Happened to a Good Person*, in which he says that the overwhelming majority of adolescents who told him they don't believe in God lost their faith because of atrocities such as the Holocaust or the untimely death of a loved one; or because after listening to news, they just "cannot believe there is an all-powerful, benevolent deity in charge of things."

As a Jew for whom the Holocaust looms large and as a father who lost his son at an early age to a rare and incurable disease, Rabbi Kushner has high standards for what is an acceptable response to Job's questions.

For him, the answer must take seriously the unjust or out-of-proportion nature of the suffering. No human being is perfect, but to say that human imperfection warrants torture or the death penalty or the mass extermination of whole peoples is unacceptable to Kushner, and hopefully to us too.

Another criteria Kushner imposes on explanations of Job-like suffering is that you have to be able to say it to a parent who has just lost a child or a survivor of the Holocaust without rubbing salt in their wound or making them want to slap you.

Of all the things people said to me while my parents were going through a divorce, the one I remember is when the seminary's dean of students said, "It may not seem this way now, but in time you will understand that this is all for the best," in other words, part of God's plan. She definitely failed the "making them want to slap you" test.

It is one thing to say that God can bring light out of any darkness, and quite another to say that the darkness was part of God's plan all along.

I can see evidence of the God bringing light out of that darkness, but saying that God willed it tempts me to reject such a God as unworthy of worship.

And that's Kushner's other criteria. However you explain Job-like suffering, he says, the result cannot be that you think less well of God than you did before. Explanations of suffering that want to use it to teach us some lesson often fail this test, as do those that claim that God is not as good or as powerful as maybe we thought.

The explanation that does meet Kushner's criteria is the one he finds in God's 2nd response to Job, the one that begins in Chapter 40. God's initial response to Job, "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth" and set limits on the chaotic sea? It emphasizes God's power and the magnificence of creation, and puts human beings back in our place, so to speak.

Some people see that as God's whole answer: "Who are you to question me, you insignificant mortal?" The problem with that interpretation, though is that it makes God seem like a bully, capable of intimidating humans, but then where is God's goodness, God's love? This interpretation of Job is in danger of leaving us thinking less well of God than we did before.

God goes on to describe in great detail different aspects of God's creation, which includes sending rain to desolate corners of the earth where there are no human crops depending on it, and creating many animals that were never intended to be tamed for use by human beings. God's message here seems to be, "Not only did I create the world, I created it in such a way that it doesn't all revolve around you." In other words, according to this text, human beings are not the center of the universe.

For some people, this is God's final answer, and the description of Behemoth and Leviathan in chapters 41 and 42 is merely a continuation of that argument.

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But if that is the case, then why include them at all? At the beginning of chapter 40, Job responds to God by saying, "See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but will proceed no further."

Job seems sufficiently humbled. His questions about his own suffering have not been directly addressed, but he has been overcome and overwhelmed by the power and presence of the Creator of the Universe. So why continue, if that was the goal?

But God does go on, inviting Job to "deck [him]self with majesty and dignity" and to judge the people of the earth. "Look on all who are proud, and bring them low; tread down the wicked where they stand. Hide them all in the dust together; bind their faces in the world below."

Here God seems to have moved beyond questions of power to address the question of justice. Would Job like to be in charge of deciding what is just and what is unjust? Or how to eradicate evil and wickedness?

Then God launches into his description of the two beasts, the beast of the land Behemoth, and the beast of the sea, Leviathan, or as poet Stephen Mitchell translates, the beast and the serpent. Kushner, along with some others, understands these beasts to be symbolic. Efforts to reduce them to actual animals like a hippopotamus or a crocodile don't really stand up to the text.

Behemoth, the land beast, is described in verse 19 as "the first of the great acts of God;" in other words, it seems to represent something that has been in existence from the beginning of creation. Kushner describes

it as the “life force” that drive within us that is our desire, not only to survive, but to thrive, to be successful, to win, and to feel pleasure.

It’s the force behind greed, but also behind progress. The same drive can lead both to a healthy marriage and to promiscuity. It is the ego that gives birth to great leaders and agents of change, but also to narcissists and tyrants. It makes life as we know it possible, but it has a shadow side that results in much suffering. With it comes our greatest gift and our greatest challenge as human beings, the freedom to make choices beyond our animal instincts.

Leviathan, the sea monster, is an ancient symbol of chaos, who appears also in Canaanite and Ugaritic mythology, and whose description calls to mind Smaug the Dragon from *The Hobbit*! Just as Behemoth cannot be tamed, Leviathan “is king of all that are proud.” “Who can confront it and be safe,” God asks, “—under heaven, who?”

For Kushner, Leviathan is an obvious symbol of the forces chaos, chance and uncertainty that operate at almost every level in our world, from random mistakes in DNA replication to our decision one day to drive one way to work and not another to some natural disasters.

These chaotic or chance events are the source of much of our suffering but they can also be the source of great joy, surprise, and innovation. While genetic mutations can lead to certain diseases and disabilities, they can also lead to immunity from disease or special genetic advantages. A random choice or event can land you in the World Trade Center on 9/11, even though you don’t normally work there, or it can keep you away unexpectedly.

Part of what makes watching sports fun is the element of surprise; who could have predicted that Georgia Tech would block a field goal and score a touchdown, defeating the Seminoles in the last seconds of last night’s game? Try to imagine a world in which everything is

predictable, everything ordered completely by pre-existing laws. We might feel safer, but we'd soon die of boredom.

There is a reason that God describes these two wild and dangerous creatures with a tone of admiration. Neither one is purely bad or evil. Human beings benefit from their existence, even as we suffer from them. You could argue that it is their very existence that makes love and freedom possible. In any case, God does not apologize for creating the world as he did, and at the end of their encounter, Job does not ask him to.

Today is Heritage Sunday, and the Scots confession boldly claims that “the interpretation of Scripture... does not belong to any private or public person, nor yet to any Kirk [that is, church] for pre-eminence or precedence, personal or local, which it has above others, but pertains to the Spirit of God by whom the Scriptures were written... We dare not receive or admit any interpretation which is contrary to any principal point of our faith, or to any other plain text of Scripture, or to the rule of love.”

Texts such as Job are difficult to interpret, and you should feel free to disagree with Rabbi Kushner's or mine.

As our Scottish ancestors in the faith remind us, the Holy Spirit can at any moment overturn any of our individual or communal interpretations, and also that our interpretations are subject to the rule of love.

But one of the reasons I find Rabbi Kushner's interpretation of God's speech from the whirlwind so compelling is that it seems consistent with what has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Jesus is always answering people's questions, even the antagonistic ones.

So it makes more sense to me that God's response to Job would contain within it a kind of explanation and intelligible response to Job's question. "Who are you to question God? Your questions mean nothing to me" is not a response consistent with the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ or with the rule of love.

Jesus also allows for Behemoth; he gives people the freedom of choice regarding their actions—he never forces anyone to follow him, he only heals when asked. He gives humanity this freedom, even when our choices result in his own great suffering and death. Jesus also allows for Leviathan; he does not heal everyone in Israel or on earth in his ministry in any systematic kind of way. He heals those people he encounters—not because they are more deserving than others, but because they happen to be the ones on his path that day.

I think the best news for us in these texts today lies in what is true about both Job's encounter with God and Bartemaus' encounter with Jesus. In both cases, God meets us where we are—in our questions, in our suffering, in our blindness. Also in both cases, eyes are opened, and the encounter with the living God leaves the human being transformed.

In Job, the book concludes with Job praying for the friends who have been his theological enemies, and leaving his new daughters an equal inheritance to their brothers—an extremely rare practice in a patriarchal society. In Mark, Bartemaus regains his sight and is transformed from a beggar to a follower of Jesus.

In a sense, the only reason we have a heritage to celebrate today is that our ancestors, Scottish and otherwise, again and again had encounters with the living God. Encounters that changed them. Encounters that they shared with others. May it also be so with us.