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SERMON

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Harmony of Our Souls

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The Book of Job is a perplexing story in Hebrew Scriptures. It asks existential questions of the nature of God and humankind. In this encounter, the humans ask, why do the righteous suffer whereas God might ask, why are the righteous pious?

A man named Job, simply introduced as righteous and beyond fault, is robbed of every blessing and comfort. His fortune withers, family perishes, and he writhes in constant pain from open sores oozing from his flesh.

Friends arrive to counsel him, probing him to recall when and how he violated their known edicts of proper living. Rather than comfort him, they compound Job's agony when they insist, he must have caused it. So much suffering could not befall a man with unblemished moral conduct.

Throughout the story, Job never doubts God's presence, but in building poetic rage, he demands answers from God for these injustices.

Today's reading, described by scholars as the most sophisticated poetry, with "virtuosic wordplay and sound play" of the original Hebrew, God answers Job.

Dear God, Silence in us any voice but yours that we might hear beyond the words and between the lines. Stir within us that we might catch a glimpse of your goodness and will for us today.

May our meditations on these words blend in harmony pleasing to your ear and resonate in our lives. We ask this in the name of your Word made flesh, our savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Job 38:1-7

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 inform me.

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

Who fixed its measurements—do 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?

A legend from the 6th BCE claims that as a man passed by a blacksmith’s shop, he became captivated by what he heard coming from within. The rhymlal cadence of hammers striking metal created a beautiful sound.

Let's put into your mind memories of old western movies, or the tv series Gunsmoke, with a blacksmith, or perhaps you've seen reenactments at historic villages.

Determined to find out why, this man examined the hammers used by the smiths to discover they produced distinct pitch based upon weight. The most agreeable sounds – harmonies that were pleasing to the ear – emanated from the smiths using hammers whose weights could be compared in the simplest mathematical ratios (1:2, 2:3, and so on).

Later, away from the blacksmiths' shop, Pythagoras found not only different weights of hammers but also varied lengths of string produced unique pitches, such that he could anticipate harmonies or discord when these sounds occurred together. He found that harmony is rational, and the harmony of the universe can be expressed in mathematical ratios or proportions we can calculate with musical sounds confirming these ratios.

Thanks to Pythagoras, for hundreds and hundreds of years, from the 6th century BCE until the time of the Enlightenment, if you sought to study math, you studied music. Yes, this is the one and the same Pythagoras who gave geometry the theorem for a right triangle of: $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$. He also studied the night stars and planets, discovering they moved according to

predicable mathematical equations, and thus they too resonate, producing a symphony of music.¹

Patience. Curiosity. Not getting stuck in entrenched ideas. These attributes, along with humility, opened Pythagoras to grasp how all created beings exist together.

That's an example of wisdom acquired by tuning your ear to the world around, of suspending your conception of what you've been taught should be, instead to be startled by what is. Other forms of wisdom rise from the inquiry of values and moral action among humans.

When we began this sermon series, *Living in the Majesty of God*, we explored Psalm 1, considered within the genre of wisdom literature.

The Book of Job stands at the pinnacle of such wisdom literature. It asks the lofty and yet raw questions of the meaning of life. We usually ask these questions when normalcy has slipped away or when misery becomes unbearable.

Job bears nothing in common with the writings in the Torah and the laws God gave Moses on Mt. Sinai. Those books

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pythagoras> and the details of the legend contained in Jeremy S. Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), p 79. Albert L. Blackwell, *The Sacred in Music*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), pgs. 49-55.

decree to the faithful that a moral life will lead to blessings and tranquility – actions have predictable consequences. The laws and prophets prescribe a cause and effect; obedience and blessing, and sin and punishment.

The Book of Job confronts that. How can it be that a man whose life stood as an example of morality would suffer so horribly?

Job's author is unknown but may have penned this story as early as the 6th century BCE – somewhat contemporary with Pythagoras – and shares common themes of Greek philosophy.

From the depth Job's suffering, while sitting in an ash heap of grief, he reasons his way from creation's beginning with order and causality, asking God why and how. Then, after 36 chapters of fist-shaking accusations, out of the whirlwind, Job hears: "Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" to begin the answer by naming Job's ignorance.

God shatters Job's conception of boundary and law and rule; the well-ordered and coherent world he thought he could control.

"Where were you, when I laid the earth's foundations?" God demands Job notice the very substance upon which he sits, and yet does not understand its origin or destiny. "Who set the cornerstone when the morning stars began to sing?" The

cornerstone as the basis from which all created bodies receive their orbit, dance in alignment, and remain balanced.

Yes, singing and harmony have existed from the beginning, ordained by God as an aspect of life in which we participate, do not control. We did not make octaves and intervals, minor chords. We are never more than simple musicians with God as composer and conductor.

God asks “are you able” to know any of what I have done, how I move the tides of the seas, make the lions roar. I created the original Jurassic Park with Leviathan and Behemoth.

Is this a punishing rebuke? Hardly. God’s speech does not bully Job or reprimand him. Rather, God’s rhetoric exposes the limits of Job’s and all human perception. We can become so anchored in a restricted compass of human knowledge, believing we are at the center, so our egos become as bruised as our bodies when tragedy strikes.

We can be so caught up in demanding righteous rewards and justice that we fail to see God’s hand and fingerprints throughout the cosmos.² Photos from the James Webb Telescope only confirm the majesty with which God created the universe and our limited view.

² Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible, Volume 3: The Writings*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019) pgs. 339-564.

God settles Job back into his place, as part of a grand order that can never be known completely, only curiously explored, and respected.

In mid-2022, it feels as though our world has become unmoored from a stable compass. This pandemic continues to rear its ugly head. The partisan affiliations seem more brittle, fracturing into smaller divides as people turn on one another inside them and not just against the “other.”

International tensions simmer from mere vitriol to flexing muscles by displaying armaments. At a more personal level, some of you hate the idea of returning to school because the teaching of critical thinking remains a third rail.

When conflict degenerates into scorekeeping that assumes the more the other side has of something, the less available to them, flames rise as well as protective boundaries. Whatever the “something” is power, influence, or physical place.

Into this anger, music becomes a balm.

Music has served as a model for God’s peacemaking – not just the inner peace of an individual but as the peace between social groups in conflict. In biblical terms, known as the peace of reconciliation.

King David was known to play his lute to calm troubled souls.

Scholar Jeremy Begbie writes, “this beguiling and mysterious art form seems to possess remarkable capacities to generate trust, defuse aggression, quell violence, and negotiate ethnic and racial boundaries.”

When music is understood, not an object but rather something that we do, something we can create with one another, it becomes a tool, literally resonating with everyone. Against those who claim they must win and the other lose, music invites two notes to be heard at the same time.

Two tones can interpenetrate; they can be in each other while remaining perceptually distinct. The notes of harmony do not compete, nor simply allow each other room, the lower tones establish upper tones without compromising any integrity. Mutual benefit resounds and sounds pleasing. Each note invites the other to enhance quality, enlivening the difference. This vertical harmony, think of notes printed within a musical stanza or heard as a chord from the piano.

This is one of the reasons music has been persuasive in peace initiatives – in the former Yugoslavia and today in Israeli-Palestinian conversations. Music challenges zero-sum thinking that hinders struggles for peace. Music happens over time, not in isolated instants, it unfolds as a process. It may move from one chord to discord, into minor keys, or even silence.

When it descends into noise or conflict, that we can measure or feel as uncomfortable, we want to resolve the tension. We sense music as directional, driving toward rest and closure.³ Music is not a complete panacea for real problems between people, but the way music is made represents the way peace emerges.

So, let's move from the ethereal conversation between Job and God and the theory of music theology to the practical.

When conversation with those with whom we disagree become shouting matches, attempting to silence the other, we both lose. When we insist on remaining on one point in an argument, unwilling to move forward, we stop the music. When we no longer speak or make any noise, weapons appear, and the price of peace becomes bloody.

We expect rational, ordered worlds, as Pythagoras thought he'd uncovered. Later mathematicians and musicologists poked holes in some of his theorems.

Job thought if he lived a righteous life, he deserved his fortune and health. And yet, his tidy life dissolved. We might feel as Job, when we stew at the onset of illness or see our retirement shrink as the stock market declines.

³ Jeremy S. Begbie, "Modeling Harmony: Music, Theology, and Peace Building," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, 2017, Vol 71(1), 13-24.

Go ahead, shake your fist at God. Ask why. Like Job, the answer we receive may become the goal we strive towards, to be part of a grand harmony. The way we live our lives becomes the answer to our existential question.

Along with all this philosophy and math, God gives us grace. If we were to demand only a world of justice, with rewards measured out based upon our moral conduct, we might forever sit in an ash heap.

Into our messy lives, Jesus offers us the gift of unmerited grace. His mercy is beyond understanding. Christ calls us to live the way of the cross, looking into the eyes of the stranger with compassion. Caring for the least of his children as we care for ourselves. This way does not make sense, and yet through his mercy, he restores and reorders our lives.

How does the story of Job resolve? Job answers God's with "I know you can do anything, and no devising is beyond you." Then Job prays for those companions who doubted him. Job's satisfaction rests in the awe of God's majesty to construct a world with morning stars that sing into our very souls. Just listen and find your voice in harmony.



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