

Sermon Title: *Continuing to pick it up*

**Job 38 & 39 (selections)**

<sup>1</sup>Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:

<sup>4</sup> ‘Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.

<sup>5</sup> **Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it?**

<sup>6</sup> On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone

<sup>7</sup> **when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?**

<sup>8</sup> ‘Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?—

<sup>9</sup> when I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band,

<sup>10</sup> and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors,

<sup>11</sup> and said, “Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped”?

<sup>12</sup> **‘Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place,**

<sup>13</sup> **so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth, and the wicked be shaken out of it?**

<sup>25</sup> ‘Who has cut a channel for the torrents of rain, and a way for the thunderbolt,

<sup>26</sup> to bring rain on a land where no one lives, on the desert, which is empty of human life,

<sup>27</sup> to satisfy the waste and desolate land, and to make the ground put forth grass?

<sup>34</sup> **‘Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, so that a flood of waters may cover you?**

<sup>35</sup> Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go and say to you, “Here we are”?

<sup>36</sup> **Who has put wisdom in the inward parts, or given understanding to the mind?**

<sup>37</sup> Who has the wisdom to number the clouds? Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens,

<sup>38</sup> when the dust runs into a mass and the clods cling together?

<sup>19</sup> **‘Do you give the horse its might? Do you clothe its neck with mane?**

<sup>20</sup> **Do you make it leap like the locust? Its majestic snorting is terrible.**

<sup>26</sup> ‘Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars, and spreads its wings towards the south?

<sup>27</sup> **Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up and makes its nest on high?**

Then the Lord spoke to Job: Do you still want to argue with Almighty God? If you have something to say, speak up!

I chose these selections from *Job* this week as a reminder to us, as we conclude this series on Scripture, a reminder of our finiteness, of our humanness and the limits of our human brains – both theologically and scientifically speaking; to remind us of our creatureliness – that despite the modern marvels that humanity has invented, despite the speed to which we can gain information with just a few key strokes, we are still the creation. And thus, as Dominican Monk Herbert McCabe reminds us, none of us who says anything about God knows what we are talking about.

Last week I went to the Governor's Office with a group of other pastors and people of faith, we went to present a letter to the Governor asking that he change his stance that Christian refugees should be preferred over non-Christian refugees – stating that we should accept people because they are our neighbor and in need of refuge, their religion (or lack of religion) should make no difference.

While we entered the office, there was another concerned citizen exiting the office. He asked who we were, and someone replied that we were an Interfaith Group. And his immediate response to a few of us was, "Evolution is a provable fact – there is no arguing it!" To which I responded, "Well, sir, I don't think anyone in our group would disagree with you on that point." And that was the end of that conversation, as we moved past each other.

The late Marcus Borg said that, "we live in the only culture in human history that has equated truth with factuality. We are" he continues, "fact fundamentalists", believing that if something cannot be proven on a purely factual basis, then it has no truth to speak to us. Part of our struggle

with scripture in our day and age is our pursuit of trying to discern whether something in the Bible is factually accurate or not. We can get lost in this space of trying to decipher fact from story. I know because I spent many years lost in this space. In one of my early seminary classes, a professor was lecturing on an Old Testament passage, breaking it down for us. And I kept waiting for him to say, “we know, of course, that this story did not *actually* happen.” But, he never did. I became more and more upset, until I finally scribbled a note to the person sitting next to me, “I think this guy actually believes that this happened!” I could not hear anything he was saying, because I wanted to know his view on the facts. I was stuck there.

When it comes to Scripture, I would say that seeking to prove or disprove the factual accuracy of a particular story is not something we need to spend too much time on.

My acquaintance at the Capital and I would agree that the Bible is not factually accurate about how the world was created. Where we differ, however, is that I do not believe that this means the Biblical account of creation is false – *I believe it is truthful*, I believe it is stating truth upon truth – the truth of the Bible is not dependent upon its factuality, for we know that truth runs much deeper than provable facts. Stories like the accounts of creation are not claiming to be historical, even if at some point in history we decided that they were – they are not claiming to be *factual*. But they are claiming to be *true*. They are making a claim on us. The creation stories are claiming the truth that God is our Creator; that the Creation is very good; that things were created and put into a harmonious order; they claim that each human was created in the image of God with limitless potential. These are some of the truths we encounter in these stories.

**I love the Bible.** This is not too shocking of a revelation for a pastor. I love it for many reasons. I love that almost every time I dig into the history of scripture, to the historical context of what is happening around a story, when I learn about the issue it is addressing – I almost always, at some point in my study, come to a point where I think “this is the same crap we are dealing with today – the same issues we are struggle with today, people have been dealing with thousands of years.” I love the challenge I find in the pages of Scripture. I love the vast variety of lives and voices found in the Bible. I love that there is a dominant testimony, and within that, a counter-testimony, offering a different perspective. I love that it is poetry and history and allegory and letter and metaphor and parable all together. I love that there is no final reading, that we can never say, “this is what this passage means for all of time, end of story.” I think this is one of the most damaging things we have done to the Bible, to claim we know its meaning for the rest of time. In doing so, we stop people from picking it up because they think, “I already know what it says – I know what it is about.” But we cannot say that, because we change, our situation changes, and who we are changes – thus it is always speaking differently. And I love the study of scripture – I love learning different pieces of historical context that go with and around a passage.

But, there are limits to our study. I, like most who go to Seminary, am a student of the critical method: we learn tools for applying literary and historical criticism to scripture; we learn how archaeology tells us new and deeper things; we learn about the original languages of the text. And this often leads us to a pursuit of “the original meaning” or trying to decipher, “what the original author intended.” I love this pursuit, this form of study, because there are endless layers of meaning that such critical thought/study can reveal. And, it has limits. No matter our

best scholarly efforts, *Job* reminds us, that we were not there – that while our brains are amazing, they are finite – we did not command the morning, nor did we give the horse its mane.

Regardless of our hours of study, regardless of our brilliant archaeological techniques – none of us were there, we do not have historical footage – we do not have interviews with Paul where he tells us, “well, this is what my original audience would have heard or thought.” We do not have original documents of those who heard stories from Scripture telling us what they were hearing and understood.

Even if we did, we would still have to translate that original meaning to our day and to our situation. We would still have to carry that original meaning across thousands of years for it to speak into our lives and our situations.

As much as I love and believe in this historical-critical approach, we have sometimes used it as a shield, to shield ourselves from having our lives changed – that we sometimes take the approach that all we need to do is understand scripture; to understand its context or original intent. But the Bible was not written simply to be understood, it was written for transformation. If we are stopping at our critical approach to scripture, if those critical methods are not leading to transformation – to deep commitment to love and justice and mercy and peace, to deep memory and to deep wrestling – then we are merely practicing an intellectual exercise.

Thus, perhaps each time before we open our Bible, each time before we read Scripture aloud, each time before we pull a commentary from our shelves, we should pray, “Holy Spirit come with power.” Though, this is a scary prayer to utter, it is not for the faint of heart.

Many scholars would say that this has been the shadow side of our decades of good scholarship, of our pursuit of the true facts and true history through Biblical Scholarship, it has

stayed in our heads – it has become an intellectual task – we have shielded ourselves from transformation by allowing it to only be new head knowledge; we have shielded ourselves from changed lives by saying, “well, we now know the author’s original intent.” I can only speak this criticism because I live this. Because I am one who often stops at new information – I stop at the point where I think, “that will preach” or, “this is an interesting perspective that most have probably not heard before.” But the goal of Scripture is not to be interesting, the goal is transformed lives and transformed communities. The goal of scripture, perhaps to put it too simply, *is to let Jesus have his way with us* – to let the God we meet in Jesus Christ have God’s way with us.

Stanley Hauerwas says that, *Scripture makes sense only in a community of transformation*. The truth of scripture only makes sense in a community of people who are seeking to be transformed by it. Thus, it only makes sense when we read it surrounded by others who are continually trying to be shaped and molded by what they find there; it only makes sense in the context of the lives of saints who have showed us what it means to be transformed by the stories and words met in these pages; Scripture only makes sense when we are trying to live it as individuals in a community. Otherwise, they are just words.

Thus, we are asked as people of faith, when we are encountering scripture we must both use our intellect and expect to be transformed by what we find; we are to use our tools of study and intellect and history and archaeology, AND at the same time, be open to be shaped and molded by what we meet there.

Let us be people of intellect and people expecting transformation. The world is waiting. Amen.

*Sending Blessing*

*And now as you go from this place, may the God of love go with you – empowering us to be people of the book, people of study, and people of transformation – that healing and hope might flow through us and into the world.*

*Go in peace.*

*Amen.*