

ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT THE ANSWER?

(Job 38: 1-11)

It's been a tough week here in the United States . . .

Whether you were a *Native American* this week, and had to listen to the whole context of the current immigration debate be devoid of any recognition that when it comes to the historical demographics of the United States of America, we have those First Nations people who were/are native to this country; and we have those peoples who were forcibly brought here from other lands during centuries of slavery; and we have those who continue to be brought here from other lands as the slavery of sex-trafficking continues. Everyone else—and/or their ancestors—came to this country through some form of immigration . . .

Or, whether you and/or your ancestors *had already immigrated to this country at some point in its history, and were already citizens*, and had to spend a portion of the week searching your soul, and clarifying your

politics, and leaning on your religion, and coming to terms with some current aspects of immigration that were staring you right in the face in ways that you never imagined . . .

Or, whether you alone or you and your family came to the end of a long, treacherous journey to get here, and had hoped to find a listening ear, a compassionate policy, a chance for safety and freedom for you and your family; only to finally arrive, and to have your family forcibly split up, your children taken away to places unknown—frightened, locked in cages, unable to communicate, going through the kind of trauma that scars them for life . . .

Yes, it's been a tough week in these United States.

It's also been one of those "revisionist history weeks" that we as a nation are very fond of having. You know, those days or weeks or months or years or decades or centuries that we spend pretending that this country was NOT built on the same values that we find ourselves so horrified to have to deal with now.

- *How dare we forget* that Native American children were slaughtered right along with their parents as they stood in the way of the brutal European immigrants who invaded their land, and would not take “no” for an answer.
- *How dare we forget*, that the Native American children who survived were forcibly taken from their families, sent to special schools where their native language, customs and traditions were branded as savage, disgraceful, unworthy of humans, and in need of being discarded from their lives.
- *How dare we forget*, that Africans and their descendants—many whose families were forcibly torn apart before they even reached these shores—were often sold away from each other on both the auction blocks AND the plantations; infants snatched out of their mother’s arms; children unceremoniously claimed and taken away by the highest bidder; some to never be seen by each other again.
- *How dare we forget*, that even in our present-day insidious and racially targeted incarceration epidemic—which we have

euphemistically labeled things like the “War on Drugs,” and “anti-terrorism” —we separate children from their parents *every day*, often needlessly and with no justice or compassion; and many of those children end up getting worse things done to them as a result of that separation than getting locked in a cage. And so do many of their parents.

We fool ourselves, and try to put ourselves as a country on a false moral footing, when we try to pretend that the lived-out values of our country do not include tearing children away from their parents. Quite the contrary, Beloved. That has always been our history, and those have always been our values.

II.

There is no doubt in my mind this morning, that in some shape, form or fashion, a majority of those people, and parents, and children—past and present—who have and who are going through somehow the brutal ordeal of family separation, have to be crying out the name that

they have for whatever God they worship, and asking their God the simple yet profoundly desperate question, “*Why?*”

Just imagine . . .

If their practice was an African-based religion where the ancestors are venerated, and counted on to send good blessings to the family from their spiritual places in the afterlife, the family being separated is praying, and wondering where the connection from *there to here* got broken.

If their practice was one of the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity or Islam—the family being separated is calling out in disbelief and desperation some emotive version of the phrase “*My God, my God! Why has thou forsaken me?*”

We are reminded by our scripture readings today, of just how long humanity has been dealing with some of the human issues surrounding our internalized beliefs that somehow we’ve got this thing going on with God, and unless I do something REALLY TERRIBLE, then things are

supposed to go pretty alright for me and mine. The book of Job is arguably one of the oldest pieces of writing included in the Hebrew scriptures, with some saying that Job himself may have lived during or even before the time of Abraham. Yet the questions, the angst, the soul-searching, the feelings of divine abandonment, deep hurt, and unbearable pain have shown themselves to be a constant ingredient of the human condition as it has revealed itself in our past as well as in our present.

I have imagined it to be no coincidence that recently many people have approached me, personally and professionally, and let their burdens down concerning situations that are going on in their lives where they just can't seem to figure out what God is up to; juxtaposed with the book of Job in general, and this passage from Job 38 in particular, being one of our scripture lessons this morning. Perhaps we are being led to a "teachable moment."

Because I am willing to say this morning that there are very few—if any—people under the sound of my voice who has not somehow experienced a disconnect from God that kinda threw them for a loop at a crucial time. I'm not gonna ask you to "say Amen"; I'm just going to ask you to let your soul look back:

- to the time when you thought God had you, but things didn't turn out the way you expected;
- to the time when someone you loved chose a destructive path for themselves, even though you asked God to order their steps;
- to the time when unexpected tragedy happened that you never saw coming;
- to the time when something important to you that seemed like it would last forever ended up being a broken and fragile mess fairly quickly;
- to the time when you thought you were on top of the world, only to have the bottom fall from underneath you;

- to the time that injustice was done to you, and that anger and resentment that lodged deep down in your soul;
- to the time when you or your loved one got that diagnosis, and all you could do was cry;
- to the time that you screamed out to God, but only heard silence in return;
- to the time that emptiness began to replace your joy;
- to the time when your privilege didn't seem to cover you very well anymore;
- to the time—or times—where you've had no choice but to scream out, cry out, shout out; to call God and everyone else within earshot a bunch of dirty names;
- to the time or times when your soul just couldn't take it anymore, and you finally said out loud "Dammit God! I thought you were supposed to be taking care of me?"

III.

There have historically been many people who have tried to convince others that they could answer some of our existential questions concerning why things happen to us that we don't believe SHOULD be happening to us.

Job's friends were like that. If you are familiar with the story of Job, as he sat in his misery trying to hold on to his faith, his 3 friends came by to sit with him and try to convince him that he HAD to have done something wrong; otherwise these things would not be happening to him.

Such a surety of knowledge can only come from one who believes that they know the complete mind and being and purposes of God. And if we learn anything from our scripture readings this morning, it's that we DON'T!

Job did everything right according to his beliefs about and understandings of God. But still—for reasons beyond him—his life

reflected our understanding of divine retribution! And Job asked “why?”

Well, notice that God didn’t directly answer Job’s question. What God DID do was provide Job—and us this morning—with a little context.

Out of the midst of a whirlwind, what must have seemed like a chaotic storm—which just goes to show you that all storms aren’t all bad—God reminded Job of his finite knowledge concerning God and God’s purposes; that it may seem chaotic, without a point, cruel, mean, evil, megalomania, like divine jerkism . . . but we strive to have faith enough to believe that just because it’s not going OUR way, doesn’t mean it’s not going according to GOD’S way.

Isaiah reminds us that God’s ways are not our ways; God’s thoughts are not our thoughts; God’s purpose for us is not necessarily the purpose we would have for ourselves.

Since we were infants, there have always been things that have happened to us that we did not understand. Now that we are older,

some of those things we have come to understand. But some of those things we don't, with more things happening every day that we don't—and won't—understand.

That's because, in the context of the world that God has made and loaned to us, we are not the potter; we are the clay.

And I've been sent here to remind you this morning, that clay doesn't stand up very well in a storm. That's why Jesus reminds us today of our need to keep the faith, and to remember that we serve the God who rules over the storms, and everything that makes up the storms!

So,

You can be mad at God; just keep the faith.

You can be disappointed, or feeling some kinda way, but hold on to God's hand.

You can give God the cold shoulder if you need to—but the potter has the same privileges as the clay. God can give you the cold shoulder too, but for a deeper purpose than just being emotional;

The long and short of it is—and I know this probably isn't the answer that you want--

God is LARGE and IN CHARGE; and God has got the WHOLE WORLD in God's hand.

God told the stars where to shine, and told the sea where to stop;

Only God knows where the vaults are that store the hail, or where the lightning and thunder are kept;

What seems infinite to us is finite for God; and what seems foolish to us is wise in God's sight.

I know that's not the answer that you were looking for this morning.

But as we bow before the awesomeness and power and love of God, let us seek to trust that awesomeness and power and love,

And in the face of it, have peace; and be still.

Amen.

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