

Sermon: "Transitions"

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May 20, 2007

First Reading: - from Job 29,30,31

Job said:

"Oh, that I were as in the months past! As in the days when God watched over me, while he kept his lamp shining above my head, and by his light I walked through darkness. As I was in my flourishing days, when God sheltered my tent. When the Almighty was yet with me, and my children were round about me, when I went forth to the gate of the city and set up my seat in the square – then the young men saw me and withdrew, while the elders rose up and stood. For me they listened and waited; they were silent for my counsel. When I smiled on them they were reassured. Whoever heard of me blessed me; those who saw me commended me."

"But now they hold me in derision who are younger in years than I; whose fathers I should have disdained to rank with the dogs of my flock. Yet now they sing of me in mockery; I am become a byword among them. They abhor me, they stand aloof from me, they do not hesitate to spit in my face! My dignity is borne off on the wind, and my welfare vanishes like a cloud. One with great power lays hold of my clothing; by the collar of my tunic he seizes me. He has cast me into the mire; I am leveled with the dust and ashes. I cry to you, but you do not answer me. Then you turn upon me without mercy and with your strong hand you buffet me. You raise me up and drive me before the wind; I am tossed about by the tempest. Yet when I looked for good, then evil came; when I expected light, then came darkness."

"Oh, that I had one to hear my case, and that my accuser would write out his indictment! Of all my steps I should give him an account; like a prince I should present myself before him. This is my final plea; let the Almighty answer me!"

Second Reading: — from "Peculiar Treasures" by Frederick Buechner

Job was the richest man around, but in a single day he was wiped out. Lightning struck his sheep barn and burned up the whole flock, not to mention the shepherds.

What happened next was the Job came down with leprosy. And what happened after that was that he cursed the day that he was born. He said that if he had his way, it would be stricken off the calendar entirely and never so much as mentioned again. He prayed to die but his heart went on beating. He prayed for the sun to go out like a match, but it kept on shining. His wife advised him to curse God.

There had been a time when God and he had been *like that*, holding up side-by-side what the leprosy had left of two fingers. There was a time "when his lamp shone upon my head," he said, "and by his light I walked through darkness. When the Almighty was with me, and when my children were about me."

The question, he said (once he'd had time to pull himself back together) was, "Where was God now?" He had looked for him in front, and he had looked for him in back; he had looked for him to

the right, and he had looked for him to the left; but he wasn't anywhere to be found. God had made himself scarce as hen's teeth, and looking for him was like looking for a needle in a haystack.

Elihu (one of his comforters) claimed that the destruction of all Job's property and the death of all his children and his leprosy were probably just God's way of helping him to improve his character and sharpen his sensitivities. But Job had no chance to respond to this new and comforting insight because at that point another speaker made himself heard, and this time the speaker was God.

Just the way God cleared his throat almost blasted Job off his feet, and that was only for starters. It is the most gorgeous speech that God makes in the whole Old Testament, and it is composed almost entirely of the most gorgeous and preposterous questions that have ever been asked by God or anybody else.

"Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep?" he asked. "Where is the dwelling of light? Have you entered the storehouses of the snow, or has the rain a father? Can you bind the chain of the Pleiades? Who has put wisdom in the clouds or given understanding to the mists?"

"Is the wild ox willing to serve you?" he asked. "Will he spend the night at your crib? The wings of the ostrich wave proudly, but are they the pinions and plumage of love? Have you given the horse strength? Have you clothed his neck with thunder? Does the hawk fly by your wisdom and stretch her wings toward the south?"

You can think of God as a great cosmic bully here if you want, but you can think of him also as a great cosmic artist, a singer, say, of such power and magnificence and so caught up in the incandescence of his own art that he never notices that he has long since ruptured the eardrums of his listeners and reduced them to quivering pulp.

You feel that God had only paused to catch his breath when Job saw his chance to break in at last. "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know," he said. And then he said something else.

That it was no longer a matter of hearing descriptions of God because finally he had heard and seen him for himself. He had seen the great glory so shot through with sheer, fierce light and life and gladness, had heard the great voice raised in song so full of terror and wildness and beauty, that from that moment on, nothing else mattered. All possible questions melted like mist, and all possible explanations withered like grass, and all the bad times of his life together with all the good times were caught up into this fathomless life. "I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee; therefore I repent in dust and ashes."

But God turned to the garrulous friends and said, "You have not spoken of me what is right as my servant Job has," with the clear implication that Job had been right in standing up to him. And then he gave back to Job more riches than he had ever had before together with his health, and Job lived to have a whole new set of children and to see them through four generations before he died old and full of days.

Sermon: “Transitions”

Last Monday night in the Landers Room, the Youth Group delivered a slide show and a panel discussion about their recent trip to help repair some of the damage of Hurricane Katrina. Their visit to New Orleans (and their hard physical labor on damaged homes in Mississippi) during spring break obviously impressed them deeply.

Their stories impressed me. One of our 16 year-old girls described speaking to a resident whose son, the son’s wife and his two grandchildren had been swept out to sea, dying together in the flood. The slide show allowed us to see the very small and primitive cabins that our youth group and their adult advisors slept in on wooden bunk beds. One of our young ladies described running between two cabins and slipping into a sewage leak.

What was astonishing to me was not the extent of the devastation almost two years later (or the terrible hardships or the challenging accommodations provided.) What you couldn’t help but notice was all the young people who went and all their advisors were alight with joy. The bottom line for having spent a week in the deep South helping the poorest of the poor was that this small band of Massachusetts Unitarian Universalists got to experience the blessing of living in right-relationship. The barriers came down between people of different cultures and race. The tragedy of Katrina had become a time when strangers traveled great distances to help people rebuild. And the Mississippians responded with enormous gratitude, generosity and open-heartedness. One man whose house was being rebuilt by volunteers came to the camp on the last night there and said, “You not only have friends in this community, you have a brother, family.” And commenting on a crucifix hanging in the home of a Roman Catholic, another man said, “I love Unitarians. The Unitarian volunteers from New Haven, Connecticut found this crucifix and gave it to me.” Such joy—when we no longer cling to our brand-name religions, and instead get up and be about the business of repairing the world.

You might credit part of the warm welcome our teenagers received to plain old “Southern hospitality.” Or you might conclude that in the wake of Katrina’s devastation, people don’t have the time or energy for pretenses of independence or delusions of self-sufficiency. In situations where people give freely and receive gratefully trust develops, relationships develop and categories like “us” and “them” become meaningless.

It seems appropriate, as we pilot our Association Sunday as a trial run for the UUA’s October campaign, that we consider what moves us as a religious community to care about other Unitarian Universalists in other parts of the country. How do we transition from isolation into right-relationship? How do we make the transformation from separation into association—from delusional egotism into the understanding that we are loved and a part of a much larger reality?

I have come into the pulpit this morning to reflect with you on only one story—the story of Job. I was reading the notes of a dear friend of mine named Lionel Metz, when I came upon his commentary (a midrash if you prefer) on this ancient biblical legend. He wrote, “Job is the story of how all of us journey from our royal ‘I-ness,’”—from our maniacal egotism, our possessiveness, our “me and mine,” our selfishness and our delusions of control—through the loss of all that unreality—until we arrive at a place where we discover that we are a part of a grandeur beyond our imagining. We come to place where we finally “get it” that we belong. Where we grasp not at beliefs, or doctrines, or creeds, but we know from personal experience and inner conviction that there is only “us”: only that sacred relationship with the ground of being, and we taste gratitude and joy and peace. Once we know that we are in relationship with all there is, we move beyond loss and gain and realize that what we thought we had lost is restored. No matter how firmly we might have been convinced that our lives had fallen into terrible circumstances or that love has abandoned us, it turns out, in the end, not to be true. And here is where it gets interesting. In the biblical legend of Job, the

way you discover what is true is in your experience of the natural world, ordinary reality. Just open your eyes and look around the creation.

God, in this story, doesn't use miracles or saints or religion to make his case. He doesn't call for angels or demand for devotion or submission to the priestly class or to moral theology. God just describes the world we find ourselves in—but what a description! It takes a singer, a poet, an artist (as Buechner describes him) to blow away all of Job's "I-ness," his demands for calculable accounting, his small framework that life ought to make "sense" to those of us with rather small and largely unused brains. God simply directed Job to consider the world that Job inhabited (a creation that is not especially concerned with Job's particular complaints, suffering or losses.) The mountain goats continue to bring forth their calves on the hillside. The stars light up the night sky. The whales swim in the ocean and eagles are soaring across the skies, no matter the challenges of Job's personal circumstances.

As one of my favorite theologians Beldon Lane writes in his book, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, "*The rich mystery of life continues, stubbornly separate from all of Job's anxious longing. A focus on the divine and natural majesty brings with it a corresponding tendency to de-emphasize the ego and its inordinate concern for self-aggrandizement. Job once took great pride that people listened to him, that he had authority and status and influence.*"

It was only after losing all of that public approval, only after being confronted by a world that was so very much larger than his little kingdom did Job find his balance, his clarity, his inward strength. After having his little "discussion" with God (where God talked and he listened) Job was satisfied, content, lost in the wonder of what he had seen and experienced.

He moved past wealth and poverty, success and suffering, being respected in the community or being rejected by the community. He was a free man—a joyful man. A man who knew that he was a part of a mystery much larger than he could even understand.

And then, all the things that he thought were lost to him forever returned. But without saying so, you know that he took quite a different relationship to the gifts he received. No longer an entitlement, no longer was he better than other men and women. He now understood that no matter the circumstances something quite wonderful was going on all around him, and in him.

Job is a legend, a story, a teaching parable. Therefore, it takes a simple and linear trajectory. Man has ego, wealth and delusions of control. Man loses all his toys, self-confidence and what he loves and holds most dear. Man finds out that there is much more going on than he had imagined. He has an experience of the holy, the sacred, the real; and then he no longer has doubts, questions or objections to the way the creation is unfolding. Thereafter he is given back what was once taken away.

The story is simple. Human existence is not. And it is my conviction that each of us makes the same journey Job did. Only we go back and forth from "early Job" to "late Job" and then return, yet again, to the unconsciousness of "early Job." And this bouncing back and forth occurs over and over again. Sometimes we remember that we are all in this together, that the natural world is miracle enough and that there is something quite wonderful that sustains our lives. We are silent and trusting and joyful, and we live in right-relationship with our families, our neighbors and in our global community.

Ah, but then we regress. We return to me and mine, to our desire to preside at the village square. We return to our judgments of them and of those people whom we also rank with the dogs (certain politicians come to mind.) Our propensity is to think of ourselves as separate, different, outsiders, outcasts or better than our neighbors.

What sends you back to the mind of "early Job"?

I know a few of my triggers . . .

When I start to compare my life with someone else's. When I ask, "Why do they have so much more? Why are they included and I'm not? Why is their road easy and mine is twisted and difficult?" Bingo. I'm sitting in Job's ashes and dust and misery.

Fear is another rapid express-ticket to "early Job." As Beldon Lane describes it, "If you're feeling that you've been 'abandoned or deceived or hopelessly lost,' then with Job you sit alone—and not all the good friends in the world can convince you that you can make any sense concerning your current desperate poverty."

These are other triggers of course: harsh judgments and the arrogance of our extraordinary self-righteousness. The belief that we have been wronged, that we are somehow life's victim, that the loss we have had to suffer (or are suffering) are somehow unbearable. Those will have you, with Job, futilely shaking your fist at God and at your neighbors saying, "I looked for good, then evil came. When I expected light, then came darkness. Oh, that I had one to hear my case! This is my final plea, let the Almighty answer me!"

What I love about the story of Job is that it shows us how to get back in right relationship. If we listen to the reality that holds us, if we can silence our complaints and our protests and our self-pity, just for moment, if we can see the stars and the ocean and rain and the places in the wilderness where new life is coming into being, then, God might just show us the storehouses of the thunder, and the beauty and fragile delicacy of a spring flower. We would understand the part we play in this vast cathedral called "earth." We would recognize that we are also a miraculous part of all of this. We would realize that we are already in right-relationship with God and our friends and our family and our community.

And then the author of Job does a quite remarkable thing. God says, "It was a good thing for Job to be 'early Job.' What my servant said to me earlier was right."

Even our complaints and delusions and being lost are a part of this astonishing mystery. When we are asleep, when we awake—when we remember that we are included, when we absolutely forget that we belong—its all a part of a mystery that is abundant and generous and ultimately good.

In Job the mystery is revealed in the natural world.

Later with Jesus, the same mystery was explained as being at the heart of the moral world. The Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, the adulterous woman, all of these parables insist that love can do amazing things; that love is more forgiving and compassionate and generous than we have assumed.

There are many ways that we human beings are encouraged to encounter this magnificent reality. As we transition back and forth from our conviction that we are separate to our understanding that we are all brothers and sisters, we will realize that we are part of a common human family of longing and hope.

I want to leave you with one more contemporary telling of the Job experience, one that focuses on the revelation that the creation is much larger and mysterious than our narrow frameworks. Beldon Lane narrates Antoine de Saint-Expery's experience in Northern Africa after World War I. The French at the time were trying to convince the native Arab population that the world was more generous and more hospitable than the desert nomads believed.

"Desert life had bred in these sun-scorched Bedouins a lean sense of hunger, an awareness that God of the desert is never given to excess or waste, a conviction that "want" is always the desert norm. The French pilots, in their idle hours would sometimes take them up for rides in their planes. But the Africans

remained stubbornly contemptuous of European displays of power, even when three of them were taken to Paris and shown the Eiffel Tower, huge locomotives, and steamships on the Seine.”

“The marvels of technology did nothing to impress the Arabs. They wept, however, at the sight of trees. The only natural world they had ever known was flagrantly stingy with its gifts. Years of desert attentiveness had trained them to expect only shortfall and subtlety. Back home, where water was precious, they might walk for days on end in search of a tiny spring, maybe a handful of palms. So when they stood in a high alpine meadow beside an enormous waterfall in the French Alps, its water roaring out of the mountain in a huge braided column, they had no way of comprehending such lavishness.”

Saint-Expery wrote: “They stood in silence. Mute, solemn . . . gazing at the unfolding of a ceremonial mystery. That which came roaring out of the belly of the mountain was life itself, was the life-blood of humanity. The flow of a single second would have resuscitated whole caravans that, mad with thirst, had pressed on into the eternity of salt lakes and mirages. Here, God was manifesting Himself: It would not do to turn one’s back on Him.”

Beldon Lane comments: “They refused to leave, adamantly declaring to their French guide that honor required their waiting . . . waiting for the end. Knowing the water could not last much longer, they awaited the moment ‘when God would grow weary of His madness,’ when this wild extravagance would suddenly and finally exhaust itself. Resolutely they stood their ground. ‘But, you see,’ the guide at last proclaimed, realizing how absurdly unintelligible his words must seem to such men, ‘this water has been running here for a thousand years!’”

“Having known the depths of desert thirst, these men could scarcely fathom a surging torrent of water, rushing forever from the rock. Nothing had prepared them for it. They could fiercely say no to locomotives and Gallic conquerors of the sky. But they must stand in silent awe before a raging waterfall, beholding in wet-eyed wonder the unwearying madness of their God.”

Lane concludes: “Perhaps this is where we all eventually stand, held attentive by what we cannot understand, but vehemently love.”

May the waters of abundant life allow you to see with your own eyes the miracles of existence. May some river of peace carry you into the awareness that the part you play in the community of humankind is essential. Together, may we build a world where no one sits alone.