

October 18, 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time: Job 38:1-7, (34-41)

by [Patrick J. Willson](#) in the [October 14, 2015](#) issue

The whirlwind approaches. The stage is set. We know what to expect from the predictable theology of “God is God and you are not,” of “God is right and you are wrong.” This theology may cause casualties, but collateral damage can be expected when you must be right. Job has anticipated what will happen: he has summoned God to answer him, and God will now crush him with a tempest (9:16–7). God has been silent since the second chapter, but Elihu predicts God will speak like thunder and shout down Job’s complaints (37:2).

We know what to expect from these ancient storm deities. God the cosmic bully will finally put Job in his place.

Job has lamented his losses, pleaded his innocence, declared the injustice of creation, raised suspicion about the fairness of God, and cursed his own existence. Eliphaz points out that these attitudes are hardly conducive to religious faith and practice (15:4). Elihu wonders who could say to God, “You have done wrong” (36:23). Job hasn’t quite said this, but he has come close enough for his friends to recoil in outrage. Now God takes over the conversation with a whirlwind to blast away Job’s complaints. It is time for the Lord to answer all the questions and clean up the confusion.

Which is precisely what does not happen when “the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind.” God “answers” Job only by asking questions—more questions, more intriguing questions, and more dazzling questions than have been asked in all the conversations leading up to this most crucial one. God’s questions, only briefly interrupted, go on for four chapters. This week’s seven verses are just the beginning.

If God’s response were meant only to shut Job up, seven verses would be sufficient. But God is only getting started here, and the extravagance and exuberance of the rhetoric insists that vastly more is at stake. Reading these four chapters aloud takes your breath away, poetically as well as literally. Here is an imaginative inspection of the cosmos, stretching all the way from ostriches to Orion. This is no blustering

windbag of a deity defensively deflecting every challenge. Instead, God acts as a tour guide of wonder.

Rather than faulting Job for his complaints, God challenges him to even grander boldness, and to the high dignity of standing up to this interview. “Gird up your loins like a man”—that is to say, assume a stature befitting the grandeur of being a human before God. Earlier Job complained that God has “stripped my glory from me, and taken the crown from my head” (19:9), but here God assumes these emblems of royal grandeur are irrevocable and are dressed out at Job’s discretion: “Deck yourself with majesty and dignity, clothe yourself with glory and splendor” (40:10).

By no means bludgeoning Job into silent surrender, God invites him to be a conversation partner: “you declare to me” (40:7). Job may not know the measurements of the foundation of the earth or where mountain goats give birth or how to hunt with the lionesses, but he does know a thing or two, and he has something to say that God is eager to hear. Twice God presses him to speak.

God’s questions may at first seem sarcastic, but as they continue they have the effect of enlarging Job’s perspective and ours. Here are questions we had not considered, phrased with a twist. Job reminds anyone who will listen how he “championed the cause of the stranger” (29:10), and we try to do that as well with our shelters, soup kitchens, and ministries of hospitality. But who gives a thought to feeding the young lions and providing for ravens?

All these questions about wild animals, this concern for weather and water—these ancient questions echo in our time, which some scientists call the “Anthropocene epoch,” when human life has such impact on the land, sky, and sea as to change the terms of the existence of life of the planet. We cannot help hearing questions that Job and the Joban poet could not have intended. With question after question God charts a creation more expansive than we contemplate. Pointing out the assortment of wild creatures, God summons human conversation partners with a capacity to enjoy all that makes up the created order.

We did not imagine that Job, with all its laments and challenges, would end with such questions. But they are not merely rhetorical; they are creative. They challenge our imagination to embrace the whole of the creation, from the foundations of the earth to the farthest stars in the heavens. With these questions God is building a temple spacious enough to include all that has been created. These questions trace

the arches and erect the buttresses of a cathedral.

Job may not remember, but the morning stars cannot forget when they “sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy.” They sang when God’s glory filled the temple (2 Chronicles 5), and they sang when the builders laid the foundation of the second temple (Ezra 3)—though on the latter occasion the voices of those who rejoiced were mixed with those who wept over the loss of the original temple, and people could not tell the difference. So much of our worship goes that way. We have lost so much that we ache to think of it all; we are given so much that thanks and praise surge up unbidden.

Job is not yet ready to praise. Wounds are still raw, and there is much hard healing yet to do. Job does not have answers to his questions, but he has something better. He stands—stands!—as a human person in the presence of God.