Stranger than we knew

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Alfred Lord Tennyson called Job "the greatest poem of ancient and modern times." Excerpts are regularly included in anthologies of world literature and religious poetry. It is an undeniable literary classic.

Why is it rarely preached in Christian churches?

Perhaps this is only my impression; I would happily be corrected. But the Old Testament generally is neglected (and I shall not begin on the silence of the psalms). Some preachers explain themselves with pious excuses, saying that we are to "preach Jesus Christ and him crucified." But the theologians of the church have long heard the voice of Christ and his God in in the Book of Job.

Charles Spurgeon preached on Job no fewer than 88 times. Spurgeon's language and rhetoric may be dated, but most preachers could do well to learn from his uninhibited excess. He did love the magic of language! And here was a preacher with hermeneutical daring. Spurgeon generously acknowledged that the Lord had chastised Job's friends and judged that they had not "spoken...what is right," but still Spurgeon gleaned the very corners of the fields to find nourishment from the sermons of Job's comforters. They may not be "right," but even in their wrongheadedness they provided gems worth retrieving for preaching. There is much to find in Job.

Preachers may be overwhelmed by the sheer size and scope of the book. The tale is long and complicated by its editing and translation difficulties. Several voices

compete for our attention, and it is perfectly disconcerting to discover that the most familiar ones are voices the Lord dismisses in the final chapter: "You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (42:7). Their sermons sound so familiar because we have preached them ourselves.

Instead of sounding like Eliphaz and Elihu, what if our preaching sounded more like this voice we hear in the book's denouement? When God thunders from the storm we might expect corrective propositions or incontrovertible dogma, but what we hear instead is question after question. The questions regard the foundation of the earth but also the stars of the heavens, familiar animals and beasts outfitted in mythological skins. God's questions go on for four chapters; these verses proposed by the lectionary are about 5 percent of the speech. Overall the experience is not one of clarification so much as astonishment.

Astonishment is a good place to begin preaching. Job's friends preach from what they know so well. Their orthodoxy is unassailable. God's sermon of questions causes the foundations to shudder beneath our certainty. There is so much more than we imagined.

As the first photographs were returning to Earth from New Horizons' flyby of the former planet Pluto, one physicist made the scholarly observation, "It's just blowing my mind!" That comment, mind you, is not that of some adolescent fresh from having just seen the latest comic book hero movie. This is a serious scientific appraisal of incoming data: "Who would have supposed that there were ice mountains? It's just blowing my mind." Alan Stern, principal investigator of the New Horizons mission, declared, "I don't think any one of us could have imagined that this could have been a better toy store."

So many new things to play with! In just the same way there is such rich and richly varied imagery that God provides for our consideration.

If God blows our minds here at the end of Job, we can only assume it is a blessed and necessary mind-blowing. Why wouldn't our minds need that? (Classical theology has described the need for mind-blowing in categories of effectual calling, justification, and sanctification, but here at the end of Job "mind-blowing" seems more evocative.) Physicists--whether they are probing black holes light years away or peering at ice mountains on Pluto or examining the sub-particular unpredictabilities within atoms--startle us by saying, *it's stranger than we knew.*

That seems a promising way to begin preaching God's great speech in Job.