

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
October 18, 2009
Job 38:1-7, 34-41

“Why We Love the Comma”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Please notice my t-shirt.

I trust you have already noticed my t-shirt.

Doug, what does my t-shirt say?

“God is still speaking...” with a big COMMA!

And under it Gracie Allen’s famous line: “Never place a period where God has placed a comma.”

“God is still speaking” and the big red comma are the unofficial slogan and logo of the United Church of Christ nationally.

We believe that God IS still speaking...to us, through us, and with us.

The “still speaking” words and the symbol of the comma are useful to us, in fact critical to us, today as we tackle the reading from the Book of Job. Job holds many challenges for us—let’s study Job and return to the t-shirt, the UCC slogan and the comma in a few minutes.

Job is not an easy book, and this morning we jump right into it.

Yes, today we struggle with the impossible, lyrical, controversial, remarkable Book of Job. Long praised as a masterpiece of literature, Job is the first of five books in the Bible commonly referred to as “The Books of Poetry”—the others are Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon.

The Book of Job is often referred to as a work of literary genius. Tennyson once called the Book of Job, “...the greatest poem, whether of ancient or modern literature.”

Victor Hugo was even more lavish in his praise of this book of the Bible when he wrote, “Tomorrow, if all literature was to be destroyed and it was left to me to retain one work only, I should save Job.”

But the lyrical verses and well written phrases in the Book of Job are not our main concern this morning. What we must wrestle with is the content of the book and the presentation of God as a gambling, boastful deity who allows a righteous man to suffer terribly.

Let's review the story to place today's reading in context.

The story begins with a man named Job who, we are told, is "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil." Job was the father of ten children—seven sons and three daughters. He had many servants, and lots sheep, camels, oxen, donkeys and great wealth.

One day, the story goes, Satan appears before God and they chat. God says to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan says, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." Then God says to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job?" (Notice God offers up Job!)

That begins a conversation between Satan and God in which God says Job is a very righteous man—like no one else on earth. Satan says Job is blameless because everything is going well for him. Satan says Job is pious because he is prosperous, upright because his life is perfect. Make him suffer, Satan challenges God, and Job will curse you.

What happens next is that essentially God and Satan make a bet. God says, "Very well, all that he has is in your power" go ahead and test Job, but don't kill him, and let's see what happens. God gambles with Satan, God is betting that Satan will make Job suffer but Job will not curse or denounce God. Satan bets that Job will.

Satan proceeds to cause Job great suffering. Job's sons and daughters are all killed, his possessions are destroyed, and his flocks are driven away by enemies. Yet despite all of Job's suffering, his response is to worship God. During Job's time of terrible trial three friends visit him—Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar—and they are all unhelpful. Job's wife is also unhelpful. Everyone tries to analyze why Job is suffering and everyone is unhelpful.

And everyone encourages Job to curse God.

In today's reading, from Chapter 38, God speaks directly to Job. Out of the whirlwind God answers Job and says essentially: who are you to question ME? Who are you to understand my motives? Who are you to question what I do? Who are you to even approach me when I am so mysterious and mighty?

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:
²*‘Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?*
³*Gird up your loins like a man,*
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

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

⁵*Who determined its measurements—surely you know!*
Or who stretched the line upon it?
⁶*On what were its bases sunk,*
or who laid its cornerstone
⁷*when the morning stars sang together*
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

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

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

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

³⁷*Who has the wisdom to number the clouds?*
Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens,
³⁸*when the dust runs into a mass*
and the clods cling together?

Job and his friends have been questioning why Job is suffering. In response, God speaks to Job with a quick review of how powerful, important and magnificent God really is.

And here we should pause. We should pause and wonder: who is this God? Do we recognize this God? Do we experience this God?

We meet God in the Book of Job when God offers Job to Satan as the subject of a bet. The God we encounter in the Book of Job gambles—he gambles with the very well being of a purely righteous man. And so I ask again: who is this God? Do we recognize this God? Do we experience this God?

Then after we are introduced to this gambling God, we become acquainted with a God who will stand by as one of his beloved children is terribly abused. Job suffers deeply—emotionally, physically, and spiritually. And God watches over and allows this process of suffering and pain. As we have seen, God even speaks

directly to Job during the process. Only at the end of the long and arduous Book of Job are Job's misfortunes reversed and all his losses restored.

God allows Job to experience profound, unrelenting suffering. And so I ask again: who is this God? Do we recognize this God? Do we experience this God?

And finally, as we heard in today's reading, we meet a God in the Book of Job who boasts and brags—look at me, this show-off God exclaims—look what I have done, what I can do! This boastful and competitive God is also sarcastic...listen:

²*'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?*

³*Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me.*

⁴*'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.*

⁵*Who determined its measurements—surely you know!*

¹²*'Have you commanded the morning since your days began,
and caused the dawn to know its place,*

¹⁸*Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?
Declare, if you know all this.*

¹⁹*'Where is the way to the dwelling of light,
and where is the place of darkness, ²⁰that you may take it to its territory
and that you may discern the paths to its home?*

²¹*Surely you know, for you were born then,
and the number of your days is great!*

*'Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, so that a flood of waters may cover you?
Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go and say to you, "Here we are"?*

And so I ask for the last time, who is this God? Do we recognize this God? Do we experience this God?

The fundamental question is: my sisters and brothers, how do we reconcile a gambling, boastful God who allows a precious child of God to suffer profoundly with the God of grace and compassion we meet in the New Testament, with our own experience of God in our lives, with the God we know, love and trust?

How do we reconcile the image of God we meet in the Book of Job with the God we meet in the New Testament—a God of love and justice, fairness and kindness, caring and compassion? How do we make sense of and understand the God we encounter in the Book of Job?

Remember I told you that the Book of Job is considered one of the greatest piece of literature of all time? Well this great piece of literature is an OLD piece of literature....Job is one of the oldest Books in the Bible. Scholars quarrel about when precisely the Book of Job was written but many believe it dates back to 2000 BCE. This is an ancient text. The authors (and there were probably more than one) wrote the Book of Job based on their experience and understanding of God at that time. They experienced a God that might gamble, boast, and allow God's children to suffer.

Fair enough. Job is a powerful book. There is much we can learn from the 42 chapters in the Book of Job. But one of the most important lessons I take from the Book of Job is humanity's experience and understanding of God has changed over time.

The God of the Old Testament, the God of the Book of Job, is the same God we know, love and trust today: God has not changed. What has changed is our understanding of God. That has changed. Since the years when Job was written our understanding and experience of God has gained depth and nuance. God has not changed in thousands of years. We have.

I love the Book of Job.

I think it teaches us much about faith and persistence, suffering and patience, integrity and devotion.

But the God that is presented in Job is not the God I know, love and trust.

And that is okay. Because the God I know, love and trust is a Still Speaking God.

My faith rests on a firm belief in *progressive revelation*...that is one of the tenets of the United Church of Christ. Progressive revelation means that through prayer, discernment and study more of God's nature, more of God's will and more of God's dreams for this world are revealed. Progressive revelation means that over time, and in the company of a community of faith, more of God's VISION is revealed to us.

And so I return to my t-shirt and my appreciation for the comma.

I believe in and experience a Still Speaking God. I believe what Rev. John Robinson said in 1620 when he addressed the Pilgrims who were setting out in boats from England heading for the new world.

The good Pastor told those frightened and huddled seekers, “There is yet more light and truth to break forth from God’s holy word.”

Through prayer, study and discernment, God continues to reveal God’s self to the people of God. Through prayer and study, in community with others, we are able to discern more light and truth that continues to break forth from God’s holy word. The God I know, love and trust is a God of expansive love, who extends an extravagant welcome, has a passion for justice, embraces peace, weeps when we suffer, and calls each one of us by name—tenderly.

The God we know, love and trust is the same God that the authors of the Book of Job strained to understand and experience thousands of years ago.

God has not changed. But we have.

We understand and experience God differently now.

We believe in a “still speaking” God.

We can appreciate the UCC adopting a comma as its logo.

We can laugh about the UCC endlessly quoting Gracie Allen when she said:

“Never place a period where God has placed a comma.”

And so we say, thank you God for progressive revelation.

Thank you God for our growing, developing, deepening, ever-changing ability to know, understand and commune with you.

Amen.