

Where Were You?

Job 38: 1-4; 42: 1-6

What a week it's been! A perfect storm hit Wall Street this week, and right on through to Main Street. Faced with the specter of a financial catastrophe in our nation, we have pinned our hopes on congress working in a bipartisan way with the administration! Now that's a scary! But there have been other scary times in our nation's history.

The year was 1958. John McCain had just graduated from the naval academy. Dwight Eisenhower was president. Archibald MacLeish wrote a Pulitzer Prize winning play based on the biblical story of Job called *J. B.* This play captured a very human response to two world wars and the nuclear arms race. *J. B.* was the Job character -- a successful and wealthy banker who had it all until he lost it all. The second half of the play is all about how he tried to understand it all -- and couldn't. MacLeish wrote in the forward to the play that it makes sense to use the Bible as a framework "when you are dealing with questions too large for you which, nevertheless, will not leave you alone." How can people keep hope alive with all the suffering in the world?

J. B. inspires another story of a latter day figure. Let's call him "JP." Now *JP* had everything. He had a job that he loved that was meaningful and that gave him great satisfaction. He had a wonderful family, good friends, and financial stability. In addition to all that, he was a really great guy! Suddenly, everything seemed to collapse around him. *JP* envisioned losing it all. The financial markets threatened to collapse and with them his life savings and retirement were in jeopardy. He saw his family's hopes and dreams slipping away. Fear threatened to overwhelm him. His sense of meaning in life seemed to get shoved aside by a flood of anxiety threatening to move *JP* right out of his own skin. He became an exile in the land of fear. Every moment was filled with thoughts of *what if?* What if this persistent anxiety eventually destroyed his health and he had not been able to keep up the premiums on his health insurance?

Suddenly, *JP* realized that he was only living in his fear -- a dark night of his soul. He was serving a God of his own making, the God of status quo. He had begun to understand ultimate good in terms of possessions, comfort, and a sense of security. This was a God whose peace looked more like safety. And *JP* realized that this God was no God. And just as suddenly, the real God came to him -- to his conscious awareness. And God said,

Who are you to make such a god for yourself -- a god that makes you feel sorry for yourself at the first sign of difficulty? Who are you to serve this fear god? Where were you when I was shaping your life? Where were you when I was dreaming of your potential? Yes, I made the great cosmic forces that seem so powerful, so destructive, to you, but I made you, too. I designed you to rest in me and to stand up for yourself. So, be a man! You will serve me well when you reveal who I am to the world! So stand up and work with me here!

Then *JP* woke up and exclaimed,

When I experience you, God, and realize who you are and what's real in this life, I regret serving fear and giving in to the pressure to self myself short. I commit myself to taking my place in this world and singing the song you have given me to sing.!

The question is, “Who made God?” My first and honest answer is, “I don’t know.” Who can know in any objective sense what the origin of God is? The Bible does not try to answer the question. It merely starts with, “In the beginning, God created” (Gen. 1:1) The Bible says that God is the beginning, the source, the uncreated creator.

There’s a saying that goes, God made man in God’s own image and we have returned the favor. My second answer, then, to the question “Who made God?” is that it’s *us*. I know this saying is supposed to remind us that the God we too often serve is a god of our own making – like the story of JP! The truth of this meaning is pretty evident. But let me suggest a third answer -- that the most sacred task of a human being is to create God. And it is the biblical story of Job that helps us understand this sacred task.

Job is a very ancient piece of writing. It is an extended epic poem with a brief prose prologue and an even shorter prose epilogue. Contrary to popular wisdom, Job was not patient -- not patient at all. He was dealing with tragic loss and trying to understand why it was all happening to him – why bad things were happening to such a good person. The story of Job questions the prevalent wisdom of his day that good fortune was a sign of God’s blessing and bad fortune of God’s curse. Thank goodness none of us feel that way any more!

Job had everything and has lost everything – his children, his possessions, and his health. All that he has left is his wife and he is kind of wishing he had lost her as well! She tells him to just “curse God and die!” If that’s not enough suffering, three friends of his show up to help Job understand why he is going through this difficult time. They explain at length how he is ultimately responsible for his own predicament. Each time, Job defends himself. He is a good person and has done nothing to deserve his misfortune. Then a fourth visitor, a young man with all the answers, shows up and reinforces the blame, telling Job he should be ashamed of himself. Finally, Job blasts them all, justifies himself, and issues a challenge directly to God.

As often happens in these stories, yet seldom in real life, God actually shows up. There is a great storm, an epiphany, a moment of truth for Job:

GOD answered Job from the eye of a violent storm. He said:

"Why do you confuse the issue?

Why do you talk without knowing what you're talking about?

Pull yourself together, Job!

Up on your feet! Stand tall!

I have some questions for you,

and I want some straight answers.

Where were you when I created the earth?

Tell me, since you know so much! (Job 38: 1-4, The Message)

And God continued in this way for four chapters.

Job must be thinking, Uh oh. (in other words, O my, what have I done?)

Job answered GOD: "I'm convinced: You can do anything and everything.

Nothing and no one can upset your plans.

You asked, 'Who is this muddying the water,

ignorantly confusing the issue, second-guessing my purposes?
I admit it. I was the one. I babbled on about things far beyond me,
...Now I have it all firsthand—from my own eyes and ears!
I'm sorry—forgive me. I'll never do that again, I promise!"

In a more familiar translation, Job said, "My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." This translation makes Job look like a worm. "I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." This is about as low as you can go. On one hand, that seems to be an appropriate response to a pretty intimidating God. On the other hand, though, it does not jive with the whole rest of the story. That's why a new translation makes a lot of sense. (from *Job* by Samuel E. Balentine, a Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary) In Hebrew, the word translated "despise" can just as easily be translated "regret" and the translation "in" can just as easily be "of." With these changes, the new translation of Job's big verse changes significantly from "I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" to "I regret my words and repent of dust and ashes."

God addressed Job by saying, "Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. (42: 1). Without going through whole four chapter of God's speech, God expounds about all the things God has done that Job has not done. "Where were you, Job, when I laid the foundations of the earth, etc. etc.?" Through God's description, Job sees the wonder of creation and is reminded that God is awesome, holy, and thoroughly intimidating. Job realizes that this unimaginable mystery called God is a wonder beyond his ability – beyond anyone's ability – to understand. Job may have felt pretty insignificant, but what was God really saying to Job? And why would such an awesome God need to go on and on about how wondrous he was? Seen that way, God can seem rather petty – impressive, but petty.

What message was God giving Job? God finished his tour of creation by describing a couple of amazing animals – behemoth and leviathan. No one knows if these were actual or mythic, but their chief characteristic was they were not intimidated by anything. In all things, they were who they were. They stayed *in their own skin*. So what is God saying?

A human being is made in God's image to be in relationship with God. In case you've forgotten, Job, in the midst of all your suffering (and, if I might add, self pity), you've got one heck of partner here!

The Christian Church has done a disservice to the dignity of people by focusing on our worm-like status in relation to God. The God of Job tells us to stand up and be a human being. This week, there have been tremendous strains on Wall Street and here on Main Street. There is post-hurricane suffering, global climate-change concerns, and all the other fears with which you and I deal in our lives.

How does all this answer the question *Who made God?* In the one sense, of course, no one made God. God just was and is and always will be. That's the very definition of God. In another sense, we really should avoid creating and serving the God that emerges from our fears and caters to our weaknesses. You and I actually do create God each day. We reveal God through our lives. We create the image and presence of God that others experience in us. It is our sacred

task, then, to do this creating as well as we possibly can. The question remains, “What aspect of God will you make in your life for all people to know? The world is waiting to see.

I can make God petty and with no greater cause for my life than to stay out of trouble and avoid irritating other people. And believe it or not, I do create and serve that God on occasion, though not as often as I have in the past. I can make God all about me with no greater cause than to keep me safe, happy, and out of touch with much of my potential. And, like the story of JP, I do find myself creating and serving that God far too often.

But these gods are not God. The God who laid the foundations of the earth and created each of us not only emerges from us, but also moves before us and stands behind us. This God calls each of us to a cause greater than we imagine – to reveal and, yes, to create the reality of God here in our world. What we do for our living, if we are parents or children, students or teachers, if our lives ultimately touch millions or just one other person, we are called to change the world by challenging what is wrong and standing up for what is right. When we bring peace, justice, and equity into life, then we participate in making God through our lives – choosing to live out of the reality of this God that already lives within us, if we will trust it.

A Native American story asks the question, “Which is stronger, good or evil, courage or fear? They are both in us like wild animals fighting for supremacy. Which one will win?” And the answer is, whichever one you choose to feed more. Join me, join us as a congregation. Our mission, our journey as God has brought life to us, is to bring God’s life to the world.