

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 5
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Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
Where were you

Then the LORD responded to Job out of a violent storm. He said: ² Who is this who spreads darkness over my plans with his ignorant words? ³ Get ready for action like a man! Then I will ask you questions, and you will inform me. ⁴ Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you understand anything about it. ⁵ Who determined its dimensions? I am sure you know. Who stretched out the surveying line over it? ⁶ What supports its foundation? Who set its cornerstone in place, ⁷ when the morning stars sang loud songs together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy? ⁸ Who locked up the sea behind doors when it burst out of the womb? ⁹ When I clothed the sea with clouds, when I wrapped it with thick darkness as its swaddling cloths, ¹⁰ when I broke its power with my decree, when I locked it up behind barred, double doors, ¹¹ I said, “You may come this far, but no farther. Here is the barrier for your proud waves.”

—Job 38:1-11

Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Job. I know it’s spelled like job, but it is pronounced Job. Many years ago the Lord blessed me with seven sons and three daughters. Oh, I loved them so much. The Lord also blessed me with great wealth in flocks and herds. The Lord was so good to me in so many ways.

But then one day my life drastically changed. I was at home with my wife when report after report came that my flocks and herds were captured or destroyed. Then I found out that all my servants were killed. Just imagine if all your bank accounts were completely wiped out in one day and you lost your job. That’s what it was like for me. And as I was contemplating all this loss, the most devastating news came to me. My children, all my children, died. The house they were in collapsed in a windstorm, and not one of them survived.

I have to tell you that that was a very devastating day for me. I mourned deeply. I tore my robe, shaved my head and fell to the ground. It was not an easy time. And yet, during that dark time I held on to something important. I said, “**The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. May the name of the LORD be blessed**” (Job 1:21). Who was I to question God? I will praise his holy name!

Yet my troubles were not over. A devastating disease struck me personally. Oh, it was awful. Painful sores covered my entire body, from head to toe. I could do nothing. The only thing I could do was sit on the ground in agony. Nothing relieved the pain. I did find some relief, if you could call it that, from scraping myself with broken pieces of pottery. But that didn’t help too much.

Now, in all fairness, I did not know what was going on behind the scenes of my life. I was not aware that Satan had come to God accusing me of being a “fair-weather-believer.” Satan claimed that I followed God because I was blessed with all those blessings. Little did I know that God was coming to my defense. In fact, God had vowed that I would be a true follower of him even in the midst of loss. I didn’t know that was taking place. But the truth is that I didn’t know a lot of what was taking place. It was a confusing time for me in my life.

Oh, I had some friends who tried to help me sort it out. They came and visited me. I think they were in shock when they saw me. They didn’t know what to say at first. They just sat there with me, staring at me speechlessly for seven days. After some time, I spoke up, and I have to tell you that I hit some low points. I had times when I wished I had never been born. I wished that I had died at birth. My life was so miserable.

My friends tried to make sense of what I was going through. But they didn’t help me too much. No, they kept saying that God is just, which is true. But then they started accusing me. They reasoned that since I was suffering so much, I must have done something awful. They told me that I must have been so much worse than other people to have God inflict this pain on me. To be honest, it was horrible advice. And it certainly didn’t help me.

But I did begin to wonder. Where was God in all this? You see, I had lived my entire life for the Lord. I always sought his ways. I wasn’t perfect, but I did make a conscientious effort to live my life for him. So, I began to wonder. Where was God? Why was he allowing this to happen to me? In fact, in my misery, I began to challenge God. I’m not proud of this, but I wanted my day in God’s court. I wanted to put God on trial. I wanted answers.

Why? Why was this happening to me? Why must I suffer like this? Why? I wanted to know what sin I was guilty of that was so deserving of this horrible pain. That was not a good moment for me, but I did have those feelings.

And then one day I saw a violent storm. I mean this was bad. You think your monsoons are bad. You should have seen this storm coming my way. And here’s the really terrifying part of it: the LORD responded to me from the violent storm.

And these were the first words he spoke. **“Who is this who spreads darkness over my plans with his ignorant words? Get ready for action like a man! Then I will ask you questions, and you will inform me.”** I need to tell you that I had this sick feeling in my stomach when I heard these words. The Lord put me in my place. He didn’t answer my question of “Why?” But he did remind me of who I was in the grand scheme of things. It was not my place to question the Lord. Who was I? What did I know? What could I understand? Oh, the Lord humbled me. And he did a good job of that.

It became evident to me quickly that I was ignorant and powerless. I had questioned the Lord. “Where are you, Lord?” And he showed me a glimpse of his perspective. He said to me, **“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you understand anything about it. Who determined its dimensions? I am sure you know. Who stretched out the surveying line over it? What supports its foundation? Who set its cornerstone in place, when the morning stars sang loud songs together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?”**

I’m sharing my ignorance with you so that you don’t make the same mistakes I made. Here I thought I could challenge the way God governed the world, and even more specifically, how God governed my life. But I wasn’t even there when he planned it all out! I couldn’t even begin to comprehend its vastness or understand how everything was held in place. The Lord’s wisdom is far greater than man’s.

I mean, you look at your world today. You have so much evidence of God’s wisdom that planned out and governs the universe. You know that this universe is far more expansive than we could ever imagine. You measure space in light years. You have telescopes and measuring tools to look into the known universe. And people still don’t have all the answers, do they? But God put all that together. Oh, his wisdom is beyond us.

But that’s not all. The Lord continued to question me. **“Who locked up the sea behind doors when it burst out of the womb? When I clothed the sea with clouds, when I wrapped it with thick darkness as its swaddling cloths, when I broke its power with my decree, when I locked it up behind barred, double doors, I said, ‘You may come this far, but no farther. Here is the barrier for your proud waves.’”**

I understood what the Lord was getting at. The sea was the most powerful force we knew. It could break ships like toothpicks. If it raged, it could devastate fields and homes. It smothered the life out of those caught in its waves. The sea is extremely powerful.

And yet what is it really? It is something that our Almighty God holds in his arms the way you hold a newborn infant in your arms. That’s power. That’s incredible power. The Lord has wisdom and power beyond your capabilities. He doesn’t fit in your brain, and that’s a good thing. Can you imagine a god whose capabilities and ways fit into your brain and being? That would mean God is limited to your intelligence, your strength, and your knowledge of the future, and pardon me, but that would be a very wimpy god, don’t you think?

Instead, delight in the fact that God’s wisdom, power, and ways are beyond your understanding. At least, that’s what he was underscoring with me. The Lord continued to question me for quite some time, but I think you get the idea. Right?

How foolish I was to question the Lord! After all was said and done, I did respond again. I said in chapter 42 of the book that carries my name, **“I know that you can do all things. No purpose of yours can be thwarted. You asked, ‘Who is this who spreads darkness over my plans with his ignorant words?’ I have made statements about things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. You said, ‘Listen now and I will speak. I will ask you questions, and you will inform me.’ My ear heard about you. Now my eyes see you. So I despise myself. I repent in dust and ashes”** (Job 42:2-6).

My friends, if you have ever questioned God or challenged him or accused him of not knowing what he’s doing, I would encourage you to do what I did. Repent! Fall before the mercy of God and realize that there are some things too lofty for you to understand.

As I mentioned earlier, I had no idea what God was doing behind the scenes of my life. I had no idea that Satan was accusing me, but God was defending me. I had no idea that God was making my faith, my trust, in him evident to Satan. I had no idea that God was using all these situations to strengthen my faith in him as my Redeemer.

And chances are good that you don’t have the full realization of those things either. You have no idea what kinds of conversations Satan has with God about you. You have no idea when Satan is trying to cause you to disown God. You have no idea when God is testing your faith so that your faith is strengthened. And you have no idea how God fully plans to resolve your problems to work out for your eternal good. But he does.

And if you want clear evidence of that, don’t look to me. Rather look to the one in whom my faith was founded. You see, the Lord was gracious to me. Because of my pride and arrogance, I deserved God to strike me down. But he didn’t do that. He spoke to me. He came to me in his Word. Even though he is the Almighty God overall and I was nothing but a worm, the Lord stooped down to deal with me in love. That’s what grace is. The Lord stoops down to those who do not deserve it.

He spoke words that my sinful pride did not want to hear. But his words were meant to lovingly humble me so that I would lean solely on his promise. You see, this is Yahweh, Jehovah, the LORD. He is the God of free and faithful grace. He is the great I AM, the one who has given promises pointing to the Messiah.

He is the LORD. He freely promised to send the Savior. Even in my misery, God the Holy Spirit kept my faith secure in that promise as I confessed, **“I know that my Redeemer lives”** (Job 19:25). I had faith that someone would come to buy me back.

As the Lord promised Adam and Eve to send the offspring of the woman to crush Satan’s head, so I believed that the Savior would be my Redeemer. He would be a human being just like me. But he would be so much more. For only God could pay the price that would crush Satan’s power. So, in faith, I looked ahead to his coming. The LORD, Jehovah, Yahweh, kept his promise. He sent his Son Jesus. Jesus is our Redeemer. He offered his holy, precious blood as the price to buy me back from Satan’s clutches. And he is victorious for he lives. And so, in faith you can say with me, **“As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the end of time he will stand over the dust. Then, even after my skin has been destroyed, nevertheless, in my own flesh I will see God. I myself will see him”** (Job 19:25-27).

That’s where we look in the times of confusion and wonder and doubt. When we ask questions like, “Why me? Why, God?” remember the Lord’s unchanging promise. When we ask, “Where were you” in the moments of darkness, rest assured that God is with you and will never leave you. He stoops down in his grace to speak to you through his Word. He stoops down in his grace to come to you through the waters of Baptism. He stoops down in his grace to give you his very body and blood as you taste his love and his presence with you.

When you ask, “Where were you, Lord,” listen to his response. He may not give you an answer to your “Why” questions. But he will tell you what he’s doing. In his Word, in Baptism, and in the Lord’s Supper, his grace shines through the clouds of loss and pain. He’s right where you need him to be. He’s ruling the entire universe with his wisdom and power. And he’s by your side giving you his love. Amen.