

“Words from the Father” – Stephanie Wing, 6.21.09

Isn't it amazing how much weight a father's words can carry? Whether they are words of praise and affirmation, encouragement or support, or critique and judgment, a father's words can shape a child. Even the lack of words can be foundational in a child's life. A father's silence can have just as much of an impact as a father's words.

Our scripture lessons today both deal with God's silence and God's words. “Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind.” This begins chapter 38 of the disturbing and challenging book of Job. In chapter 1, we are introduced to Job as an upright and blameless man who fears God and shuns evil. Both in virtue and in wealth, he was one of the greatest men in all the East. The first two chapters of this book relate a very curious and really disturbing dialogue between God and Satan. Basically, God holds up Job as an exemplar follower, and Satan responds that Job is faithful to God only because God has blessed Job with wealth and happiness. God gives Satan permission first to strike at all of Job's possessions, and then to strike Job's body. Satan does this all, certain that Job will turn his back on God when he loses everything. Yet remarkably, Job says nothing against God. Job has lost everything, and now he is wasting away with sores all over his body. Job's wife tells him to curse God and die, but Job refuses.

Chapters 3 through 37 give us a window into Job's suffering. His wife and friends argue with Job about God, and what Job has done to deserve this trauma. They have theological discussions. Job's friends urge him to challenge God, to plead his case. Job's friends long for God to speak, to show Job why he is being punished, to answer to Job's case. Job cries out to God. And God is silent.

There is great agony in the book of Job, without a doubt. There is physical agony, of course, but also the agony of losing everything in one fell swoop. There is the agony of losing sons and daughters, of losing land, treasures stored up for a rainy day, and of going from the top of the socio-economic ladder to being indistinguishable from the common beggar. More people these days can relate to some of what Job was experiencing. Those who have lost jobs face the loss of social status, economic solvency, and even identity. Those nearing retirement and currently retired have seen the nest eggs that they spent their working lives building suddenly wiped out as markets have crashed. Job's losses are very real, and understandably the source of great pain.

But even greater than the pain of loss is Job's agony over God's silence. Through all of this, Job remains faithful. He doesn't curse God. But Job wants to question God. He wants to argue his case. He longs to hear the words of the Father whom he has trusted his whole life. But nothing. Silence. "Then, the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind." For nearly four chapters, God speaks to Job

as the ruler of all creation. Job finally responds, "I am not worthy," and is left confessing that God can do all things.

Let's flip now back to our Gospel reading. Jesus and the disciples are crossing the Sea of Galilee in their boat when a horrible storm arises. Remember that these disciples were called to follow Jesus from their fishing boats. They knew this sea like the back of their hand. They knew its common storms and weather patterns. They knew how to handle it better than just about anyone. And they were terrified. And while they were terrified, Jesus was asleep. They had to wake him up, with the accusatory question, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" After Jesus calms the storm, he turns to the disciples and asks, "Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?" At this, the disciples, like Job, are speechless, utterly in awe of the ruler of all creation.

Both Job and the disciples are in crisis mode, crying out to God. In times of trouble, we often find ourselves crying out to God. Even people who haven't grown up in the church, who aren't really sure what they believe, often find themselves turning to God in times of crisis. I remember when I was working as a chaplain at the University of Louisville Hospital, one day I was doing rounds on my floor, and just about to take a break for lunch. Instead, I decided to check in on just one more room. It was a new patient, and I didn't know anything about him other than that he had been in a bad motorcycle accident. I walked into the room

and introduced myself, and didn't get much of a response. He didn't seem to be too interested in having a chaplain visit. Normally I would have just picked up on this and said, "If there is any way I can be of help, just let me know," and moved on to the next patient, but for some reason I stayed. After a minute or two of small talk, I asked, "Would you like me to say a word of prayer with you?" To my surprise, he started to tear up, and said, "Yes, yes I think I would like that. I haven't ever really been one for church-going, and I hate to say I haven't given God much thought. But you must be an angel, because just before you walked in the room, I said, 'God, if you're out there, I need to hear from you.' And then you walked in."

We all want to hear from God. Especially in times of need. That is the agonizing hunger that Job suffers for 37 chapters. It is the anxiety behind the disciples' question, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" We want to hear from God. We want God to answer to us. And the worst answer that we can possibly get is silence. We want God to respond to us, to answer to us. And God does speak to us. God speaks to us through Scripture, and through other people, and in any number of ways, some of which we might not even recognize.

But sometimes we might feel like we wait in silence. We might even wonder where God has gone. Like Job, it seems like we have lost everything that matters and God is nowhere to be found. Or like the disciples, we find ourselves in

the midst of a sudden storm, losing all of our bearings and struggling to find a foothold. We know that being Christian doesn't shield us from these experiences. We don't have to look any further than our readings today to be assured of that. But what our readings also remind us is that, in those times of trouble, even if we feel like God is being silent, God is there with us.

After Jesus calms the storm, he turns to the disciples and asks, "Why are you afraid?" Many times in Scripture, God speaks to us and says, "Do not be afraid." God doesn't tell us that there isn't anything to fear, but God tells us, "Do not be afraid." The image of God that we see in both Mark and in Job is an image of God's power and presence beyond our wildest imaginations. The disciples are left wondering, "Who is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?" And Job confesses after God speaks, "I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted."

No matter what is happening in your life, nothing is bigger than God. God, who created all things with care and intricacy, is just as carefully and intimately involved in our lives. Think of the vast expanse of the universe; all of the coded genetic information that is contained on a single strand of DNA, which is invisible except under the most powerful microscopes. We know a lot more about the natural world than Job and his contemporaries knew, and yet we would still

tremble before the Creator who made it all, and who knows it all in such intimate detail that no mind can ever comprehend.

Though it may seem like God is absent through much of the book of Job, God is very present, even in Job's time of trial. Jesus' nap on the boat may have made him seem unaware or unconcerned with the stormy seas, but his words to the disciples show that they never had reason to lose their faith. He was there with them all along. And still today, when we find ourselves in times of crisis or traveling stormy seas, we have the same assurance that God, our Father, is with us through it all.

I don't know everything that you are going through right now, but God does. God knows and God cares more than we can imagine. God's compassion never fails. Our Creator gives us strength for today, and hope for tomorrow. And even when all we hear is silence, God is always with us. As we listen for words from our heavenly Father, let us remember always that God is here, and great is his faithfulness.