

**VOICES IN THE WHIRLWIND**  
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

**Job 38:1-7**

Today's reading from the Hebrew scriptures comes from the book of Job, a retelling of a very ancient folk tale. It recounts the story of a good man, a righteous man who loses everything—his wealth, his health, his family. Central to Job is his question: why? He has been shaped by the timeless conventional wisdom that good people earn good lives, or conversely as his "friends" in the story keep insisting -- if bad things happen, you must have done something to deserve them. Job is ferociously impatient and doggedly persistent in demanding an explanation from God. At last, God replies, with a fabulous non-answer that goes on for 4 full chapters and 129 verses. Our reading today is just the beginning. From the book of Job Chapter 38:

*"Then the Unnameable answered Job from within the whirlwind: Who is this whose ignorant words smear my design with darkness? Stand up now like a man; I will question you: please, instruct me. Where were you when I planned the earth? Tell me, if you are so wise. Do you know who took its dimensions, measuring its length with a cord? What were its pillars built on? Who laid down its cornerstone, while the morning stars burst out singing and the angels shouted for joy!"* (Translation by Stephen Mitchell)

Whirlwind seems like a pretty great image for these days we are in, implying as it does, chaos, destruction, and blinding speed. I don't know about you, but I have found the last couple of weeks to be a whirlwind also of pain. The outpouring of human suffering has been stunning, and quite unlike anything I have ever experienced. Something profoundly deep and painful has been torn open, and so many people, mostly women, some men and people who are neither, have been jolted into painful remembering and moved, all at the same time, to share their stories of abuse and dehumanization. After the Kavanaugh hearing, calls to the National Sexual Assault Hotline increased more than 200% overnight. Where is God's voice in this whirlwind?

Nadia Bolz Weber, the fabulous pastor and theologian recently wrote, "I'd like to welcome you all to the apocalypse. Pull up a chair and make yourself uncomfortable." "Apocalypse" in our tradition means uncovering, a peeling away, a revelation of what is hidden underneath of things. At the time of Jesus "apocalypse" was a big idea, and a popular literary form (Book of Revelation). The point was not threats or fear, it was all about hope, re-birthing hope in oppressed communities. At its core, Weber says, it is a "big, hope-filled idea: that dominant powers are not ultimate powers. Empires fall. Tyrants fade. Systems die. God is still around"

She calls sexual abuse in our country "the dark ubiquity of women's personal experience." Let that sink in; all women. She suggests that "the male domination at the center of the sexual harassment issue" is being revealed apocalyptically in prime time. Words, incidentally, that she wrote 6 months before the Kavanaugh hearing. This apocalypse runs deep. And while policy changes and sensitivity training are important, she says, real lasting change requires deep spiritual work. And that must begin with truth-telling, confession, deep examination about just why gender inequality is such an

enduring reality. She writes, "If we look as deep as we can stomach, we will find heresy at the center... a heresy that uses the Bible and God to justify dominance of one group over another." Welcome to America.

It's the same America we've been grappling with in our explorations of whiteness and white supremacy. Last year, we spent some time with the black liberation theologian James Cone, who died just a few months ago. His last work of theology was the book "The Cross and the Lynching Tree" an apocalyptic theological reflection on this nation's devastating history of white supremacy and racial violence, supported by white American Christianity. Racism, America's original sin, is fueled by the same heresy that Bolz Weber is calling out.

Cone has talked openly about how personally devastating it was to write the book, to delve so deeply into this horrifying history. At the end of a lengthy televised interview, Bill Moyers, with obvious despair in his voice, asks him, "so where do you find hope?" Cone laughs. Basically, he says, wherever white people find the courage to start waking up to this history, to its ongoing effects, there is hope. Apocalypse, revelation, Bolz Weber assures us is a good and healing thing, because truth telling is essential to keep hope alive; it is non negotiable. As James Baldwin wrote, not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced. And we desperately need change.

We are gripped in this country by interwoven systems of patriarchal oppression—racism, sexism, heterosexism--that are playing out in destructive abuses of power all around us, in ways that threaten us all. And here's the thing we all must remember—these systems deform oppressors as much or more than those they oppress. We have a lot more truth telling to do. Healing requires that we keep waking up white, waking up hetero and cisgender, that men find a way to begin waking up male. We need to name and claim all the ways that our privilege oppresses others, and each other, and explore strategies for dismantling the systems that support it. It is hard, painful, necessary work. Truth telling, with love, is essential for hope to thrive. And, seriously, don't we all need more hope these days?

The book of Job would seem a strange place to look for hope—this fable about a man who loses everything. At first glance, Job seems the epitome of privilege—he had it all, and all he had, he earned. He worked hard, followed the rules, he is a righteous man, and so feels entitled to his status, his health, wealth and happiness. He is unhinged when all that is lost. His losses grieve and isolate him, and then, begin to connect him with this much larger reality of human suffering. It motivates this marvelous outburst of lament and moral outrage at all the ways that humans suffer. Job forcefully rejects all the sorry attempts of his so-called friends at explaining and justifying, and goes straight to God demanding an answer.

At last, God responds from the whirlwind. And let's be clear, God does not give Job anything remotely resembling an explanation for suffering; there is no such thing. God does not try to justify anything. God simply responds to Job's vision of a world filled with pain and suffering with a different angle on that same reality, a God's eye view, you might say, where beauty and goodness are revealed as the very foundations of creation itself. And, I don't hear that voice from the whirlwind as stern and scolding, as

so many do; I hear gentle wisdom and humor. *“Where were you, Job, at the dawn of creation, when the morning stars burst out singing and the angels shouted for joy?”*

Steve Garnaas Holmes writes, “God doesn't belittle Job or criticize him for his lack of knowledge. God reminds him that his life, even his suffering, is part of a great, grand wonder, that Job is himself a vast marvel of which only a little bit is Job.”

Wonder, beauty and goodness do not and cannot cancel out suffering. But they do provide context. Beauty and goodness exist right alongside suffering and pain, always, and I'm beginning to suspect that its in holding the tension between them, in being willing and able to see the deeper truth in all of it, that we find authentic and lasting hope. Hope, that is more attitude than answer, more a capacity than a commodity that we can have more or less of. Hope is an orientation of spirit and the heart, in the words of Czech freedom fighter Vaclav Havel “not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.” Christine Blasey Ford exemplifies this kind of hope.

And if we listen closely, we will hear this kind of hope echoing throughout human history, especially in the darkest moments. Anne Frank, right in the midst of holocaust wrote, “In spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death. I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever approaching thunder, which will destroy us too, I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquility will return...” She did not live to see the return of peace, and yet her words live on, and continue to inspire peace, healing, hope. One of her biggest fans was Nelson Mandela, who turned to her diary for inspiration during his long years of imprisonment, and carried her hope back out into a world that he helped transform.

So, hope is also contagious and transformative. Saint Annie Lamott writes, “All I have to do is stay grounded in the truth. By showing up with hope to help others, I'm guaranteed that hope is present. Then my own hope increases. By creating hope for others, I end up awash in the stuff.” Its why we gather here, together, week after week, to practice hope. The movements of every worship service follow this same pattern: we begin by remembering the wonder and goodness of creation; we confess the truth of our human estrangement from God and each other; we listen for words of wisdom; give thanks and resolve together to go out, and share healing and hope with the world. On November 4, at 7 pm, we will gather here for an extra shot of hope, at our annual Peacefest, which this year we are calling “Engaging with Hope.”

Hope is an attitude, and it empowers action. And according to the wisdom of our tradition, the real source of that hope is the Spirit herself; hope cannot disappoint us because, according to the Apostle Paul, “God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.”

*Our hearts.* Community is essential to this journey of hope. It is a hard, and vulnerable way. It is a joyful way. It is the only way to healing and wholeness. And when, like Job, we forget hope, which we do and we will, we can listen together in the whirlwind, in darkness, mystery, and unknowing, trusting that the voice of Love is right there,

always, calling us back to truth, to beauty, to goodness, back to God, ourselves and each other, showing us the way. Amen