

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTION¹

Job 23: 1-10

A Communion Meditation by
Thomas R. McKibbens

This week's *Christian Century* has a short article about a journalist named Spencer Case, an avowed atheist working in Iraq. He said that he felt an impulse to pray on two occasions. One time was easily explainable, he claims—it was when his camp was under a mortar attack. The other occasion was when he slept under the stars in a desolate part of western Iraq and was struck by the contrast between the human violence in that country and the beauty and order of the cosmos.

It prompted him to pray this prayer: “Dear God, I have come to the conclusion you probably don’t exist, but I’ve also come to the conclusion that any one view I hold may turn out to be mistaken, however unlikely the odds seem. So if you are there, if I am wrong, you know where to find me.”²

I

Have you ever wondered about the anonymous author who wrote the story of Job? What could have been happening in the writer’s life that would create a universal masterpiece such as that story? I like to picture the writer

¹ ©Thomas R. McKibbens, October 11, 2009.

² *The Christian Century*, October 20, 2009, p. 8.

perhaps like Spencer Case lying on his back, staring up at the cosmos. Like the journalist, this writer is really honest. While all the religious authorities were quick to connect God's blessings with living a good life, here was an honest writer who knew that sometimes good people, very good people, had terrible things happen to them.

Maybe the writer himself was one of those good people. And maybe terrible things had happened to him and he had raised the universal question: "Why me?" And his question had filled the void above him with no answer. Maybe he had suffered, but he was too modest to go to the religious authorities to ask the obvious question: "I did it all right; I fulfilled all my religious duties; I followed all the rules; but I have suffered in ways that are clearly unfair. Why me, of all people?"

The prayer quoted by the journalist, Spencer Case, is very much like the prayer attributed to Job: *Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling!*³ He could have added, like the journalist: "If you are there...you know where to find me."

II

The story of Job is universal because it has all the usual answers in the role of Job's so-called friends. His good friend Eliphaz says that God is just

³ Job 23: 3.

trying to teach Job a lesson. The modern day equivalent to Eliphaz is someone saying, "There is a reason for everything. God is just trying to tell you something."

And then there was Job's friend Bildad, who tells Job that he must have done something to deserve his suffering...some friend! That is definitely not good bedside manners. But at least he is not as rude as Job's other friend, Zophar, who tells him that if Job thinks he has suffered so far, just wait...it's going to get worse!

The writer of this tale of Job is brilliant because he brings us into the story with these friends. We all know them. We have all heard them before. It is a tale for every generation. Every age asks, "Why? Why me?" And every age gets the same old, tired answers.

But then in the story we finally hear from God, who has been silent through all the nonsense spouted by Job's friends. Finally God speaks, and it is a turning point in Job's life. The reason it is a turning point is that God tells Job that he is asking the wrong question. He gives Job a new vision. Job has been asking the "Why?" question. God tells Job that he is asking the wrong question: the question to ask is not WHY? but WHO?

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?...
Who determined its measurements?...
Who stretched the line upon it?...

Who laid its cornerstone?...

Who shut in the sea with doors?...

*Who has cut a channel for the torrents of rain, and a way for the
thunderbolt?...*

Who has begotten the drops of dew?...

*Who has put wisdom in the inward parts, or given understanding
to the mind?...⁴*

Many people read this section of Job and think that God is angry. They read it as if God is scolding Job. But I agree with the interpretation that God is not scolding Job and trying to put Job in his place, but rather that God is redirecting Job from the WHY question to the WHO question.

The reason God keeps asking Job the WHO question is that God is providing Job a new lens through which he can see his own predicament. Instead of asking “Why me?” Job is now asking, “Who is with me in this situation?”

III

But even as I speak these words, I am confident that some people are saying, “Look, that is easy enough to say in church. But I am facing bankruptcy; my house is being repossessed; my husband has dementia and I don’t know how long we can hold out. My life is falling apart. What in the world am I to do?”

⁴ See Job 38.

Let's say that no matter when it is or where you are, you need something that may not sound very religious, but gives you hope. Would it make a difference to know that you are loved and valued? Would it make a difference to know that you are not alone? Would it make a difference if the creator of the universe, the one who gave you life and breath, considered you of immeasurable value, of such value that we can't begin to imagine it?

I don't know how much difference that might make for you, but I expect it made a huge difference for the writer of Job, just as it made a huge difference in the life of the psalmist who wrote, *In your presence there is fullness of joy...*⁵ I can't help but notice that the psalmist did not write, "In God's solutions to all my problems there is fullness of joy." No, some things just happen in life, things for which there is no explanation and never will this side of eternity. But there is a presence...THE presence...which makes all the difference.

IV

That presence is what the Lord's Supper is all about. You and I both know that bread is bread and grape juice is just that. There is no shallow magic in this meal. But there is what C.S. Lewis called "deep magic," a deeper meaning beneath the surface reality.

⁵ Psalm 16: 11.

He pictured that truth with the story of Lucy and her friends who entered the world of deeper magic through a wardrobe and find that they are suddenly standing in a snow-covered, magical forest, in which they have all kinds of adventures. They face danger and heartbreak, but discover the ultimate truth that the cosmos ultimately gives life even in the face of death.⁶

The Lord's Supper is that place where step into that deeper magic, that deeper truth. It's just bread and juice, but it is the entrance into a deeper world, a world that answers the deeper question of "Who is with me? Who cares for me? Who walks with me? Who gives me the strength to face whatever my days may bring?"

The answer to the WHO question makes all the difference.

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.