

Proper 7, Year B  
Job 38: 1-11  
June 21, 2008

Trinity Episcopal Church  
Sonoma, California

Breaking Out of the Box:  
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Not long after I started my job as chaplain at St. Paul's Episcopal School—an Episcopal school for children of all faiths and no faith, I was called in to mediate a conflict—a conflict that broke out in a first grade classroom. Those six-year-olds were engaged in a raging debate over the nature and existence of God. An interesting intellectual exercise if you're twenty-five and gathered around a seminar table. But these were six-year-olds arguing passionately about God—Was there a God? What did God look like? What did God act like? Who in their lives was most like God? What kind of God let the Tsunami happen? How could God let their garter snake die? All had an opinion. All held their opinions fiercely. All seemed to believe that theirs was the only valid opinion. Not much maneuvering room.

At first I just listened to them hoping that there would be some common ground. No such luck. They weren't into looking for connections; they weren't into seeking similarities. They were into defending their position and refuting the positions others took. I think that makes sense in an odd sort of way. If there's one God, then God can be only one way. Right?

I asked them to draw a picture of God. Almost everyone did. Except the kid who steadfastly held that there is no God. "How can I draw a picture of something that doesn't exist?" he asked. He turned in an empty sheet of paper. The rest worked furiously on their drawings—one pictured God as two children, one black and one white, holding hands; another drew an old man with a beard; God as the sun rising; God as scribbles on a page; God as teacher; God as friend.

When they finished their drawing, they brought their pictures up to me. We put them on the board. Even the blank piece of paper. I'd planned to ask them how they came to their picture of God. But then I stepped back and looked at the board filled with 22 different pictures of God. How rich it was—a tableau, a multiplicity of images of God. "What a picture of God," I thought to myself. And then I asked them, "What if God were all of this and more?" "That's not possible," they all said at once. Each of them had a handle on God. And they weren't ready to let go. Those first graders had God in a box.

They are not alone. Every time I heard "This is my father's world," I thought it was about my Dad. Over time, God and Dad sort of melded together. God the father. God my father. God in a box acting pretty much the way my dad acted. I think we often box God in. I think that's what Job was doing. And his friends as well. Boxing God in. Limiting God.

Perhaps you remember the story of Job—God’s faithful and righteous servant. A man of integrity. An man who had it all—good wife, nice home, children and grandchildren, well-respected, a mover and shaker. A friend of God. Then, in an instant, he lost it all—his wife angry, his children and grandchildren dead, his home destroyed. No longer a mover and shaker, Job finds himself covered with scabs and sitting on an ash heap cursing the day he was born and wondering how God could have done this to him.

His friends offer their explanations. One suggests that God punishes the wicked and rewards the just. Job must have done something wrong. Another says that God is teaching Job a lesson he’d better.

Job’s friends had an image of God as one who intervened in human affairs rewarding the just and punishing the wicked. If things went badly for someone, they deserved it. Clearly, they had done something wrong. Job had lost everything. He must have done something wrong. God didn’t act randomly.

Yet this image of God didn’t match Job’s experience. Job knew he’d done nothing wrong. Job valued his integrity; he trusted his righteousness. No wonder Job wanted a word with God.

Job gets what he wants. God comes to Job in the whirlwind. That’s where our story starts today.

God says to Job, “Who is this that darkens counsel by word without knowledge? Gird up you loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me.” What a thing to say to a man who’s lost everything. What a thing to say to a man covered with scabs and sitting on an ash heap! It’s outrageous.

Or is it? Could it be that God is helping Job shift his frame of reference? Is this God opening up new vistas to his servant Job?

God asks Job,

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

Who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?

From whose womb did the ice come forth, and who has given birth to the hoar-frost of heaven?

Who provides for the ravens its prey when its young ones cry to God and wander about for lack of food?

Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?

Do you observe the calving of the deer?

No wonder Job falls silent in the face of these questions. What can he say? God is so much bigger than Job’s image of God. God operating on a completely different plane of action.

I look out at our world—demonstrations in the streets of Teheran, North Koreans testing missiles, young journalists in a North Korean jail, and nuclear powers all over the world at odds with each other, and I find that God of the whirlwind comforting. God who hears the morning stars sing. God who has the power to shut in the sea. God whose womb bears life. God more than I can imagine. God more than I can know. God for times that confound me.

But is God of the whirlwind enough? Can we say “It’s a wrap” once we encounter the God who confounds our understanding? Once we meet a God bigger than the events and obsessions of our little lives? Are you comfortable with leaving it there? I’m not.

In this world in which we live—this crazy, chaotic world where things don’t always turn out neat—I need more. I think of my friend who, in the last six months has discovered that her mother, sister-in-law, brother-in-law and husband all have cancer and I need the God of the boat as much as I need the God of the whirlwind. I need the God who sails with me to distant shores. I need the God who sleeps in the stern when the seas get rough but who responds to my call when the boat is about to sink.

So often we, like Job and his friends, cling fiercely to a single image of God—God who weighs the scales of justice, God who rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked, God who comforts us when we are afraid, God of the whirlwind, God of the boat. But God is so much more than all of that.

God is the mother who worries over Jerusalem.  
God is the eagle bearing us up on his wings.  
God is the parent who frets over children gone astray.  
God is the one who dies on the cross.  
God is the one who mourns that loss.

One God—many facets. God big enough for all of us. Thanks be to God.