Chapter Ten

The Sufferer's Wisdom

The Book of Job

IT IS SAFE TO SAY that at the present time the church makes little use of the book of Job for its pastoral ministry. This has not always been the case. The medieval church made heavy use of it in preparing Christian souls to deal with suffering without falling away from their faith. But the modern church has pulled back, even in recent decades. Episcopalians may discover a sign of our retreat in the latest revision of *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979). The Burial Office retains that luminous affirmation: "I know that my Redeemer liveth" (Job 19:25). But gone is Job's statement of resigned grief: "The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (1:21). "The LORD hath taken away"—does that in fact express resignation, or is it the beginning of an accusation? That troublingly ambiguous statement is in the 1928 version of *The Book of Common Prayer,* but the 1979 revision pitched it out. And one must ask, Why? Have we grown afraid to lodge the responsibility for our grief with the Lord, as Job so consistently does?

I suspect that we do not more often appeal to the book of Job in times of distress because we do not really know how to read it for the sake of our souls. And in this, modern biblical scholars have not been of great help. Too often they will tell you that what is at stake in this book is the theological question for which the technical term is "theodicy"—in plain language, the question of whether or not God is just. But in fact that question, while present in the book, proves to be a red herring, and Job's hapless counselors get lost following the scent. The focal point of the book is not God's justice at all, but rather the problem of human pain: how Job endures it, cries out of it, wrestles furiously with God in the midst of it, and ultimately transcends his pain—or better, is transformed through it.

The book of Job is about human pain; it is also about theology, the work of speaking about God. In the last chapter, God takes the friends to task, saying, "You have not spoken accurately about me, as has my servant Job" (42:7). Here God is pointing obliquely to what is so remarkable about this book. It shows us a person in the sharpest imaginable pain, yet speaking accurately about God. Job gives us immeasurably more than a theology of *suffering*. It gives us the theology of *a sufferer*. In it we hear authoritative speech about God that comes from lips taut with anguish. From this book above all others in scripture we learn that the person in pain is a theologian of unique authority. The sufferer who keeps looking for God has, in the end, privileged knowledge. The one who complains to God, pleads with God, rails at God, does not let God off the hook for a minute—she is at last admitted to a mystery. She passes through a door that only pain will open, and is thus qualified to speak of God in a way that others, whom we generally call more fortunate, cannot speak.

Does this book teach us sympathy for the sufferer? I don't know. Surely it means to breed in us humility before the one who is suffering. Job instructs us perhaps more about respect than about compassion; if we read this book well, then it enables us to honor the sufferer as a teacher, a theological resource for the community.

Unanswered Questions, Brooding Silences: The Prologue (Chapters 1-2)

Often good teaching proceeds from leading questions, questions that touch sensitive points and goad us deeper into a subject. Just such questions generate the story of Job. The first two chapters pose a series of highly consequential questions. After all, the whole thing begins with God's proud and naive question to the Satan, who has just returned from an inspection tour of the earth: "Did you notice my servant Job, that there is no one like him on earth, a man of integrity, and straightforward, who fears God and turns from evil?" (1:8).

Likewise, the Satan's cynical reply to God's question is itself a question: "Is it for no good reason that Job fears God?" (1:9). That question is hardly classically diabolical. The Satan as represented here is not a red devil with a pitchfork, tempting poor souls to evil. Rather, he is a member in good standing of the heavenly council, one of God's trusted, if somewhat surly, subordinates. "The Satan" is not a name at all, but rather his job title; we might translate the Hebrew term as "the Adversary." He is something like the chief prosecutor in the divine realm, or the head of the heavenly FBI—not an appealing figure, of course, but that is precisely his role, to prevent any dangerous sentimentality from eroding cosmic order. And that includes any dangerous sentimentality on God's part. So the Satan's questions to God are brilliantly engineered to eradicate romantic delusion from the Divine Lover's heart. "Is it for no good reason that Job fears

God? Haven't you thrown up a protective wall around him and around his house and around everything he has? But now just send forth your hand and touch everything he has—see if he won't curse you to your face!" (1:9-11).

The standoff between God and his professional Adversary looks just like a pagan folktale, where the gods vie for power and prestige, and humanity is inevitably the pawn in the game. By contrast, biblical religion is generally insistent that God does not play dice with the universe. It is shocking, therefore, to see Israel's God accept the dare and, by his own admission, "swallow up [Job] for no good reason" (2:3). If we take that admission at face value, then God looks considerably worse than the Adversary. Maybe the Satan is upholding some notion of cosmic order and fairness. But God appears to be the most vicious kind of stooge, for his cruelty is incidental and therefore utterly indefensible. So we have to ask: Can that face-value reading of the folktale possibly be right, since it invalidates the way God is portrayed everywhere else in the Bible? Unless we are content to imagine that the author of this book does not care at all about what the rest of the Bible says about God—and I am *not* content to imagine that—then we must stop at the outset and try to make sense of this bizarre scene where God accepts the Satan's dare, with its terrible consequences.

The obvious implication of the Satan's questions is that Job has good reason for serving God: he does it for what he gets out of it. In other words, not even God's favorite servant is motivated by love. Now we can see why God has to bite—the bait hidden in the Satan's questions is the core issue of covenant faith, namely, the love that obtains between God and humanity. What covenant means is that God and human beings can be bound together in a relationship whose basic character is not instrumental—even though that relationship may be beneficial to human beings and pleasing to God.

Rather, covenant relationship is based on love that transcends self-interest on either side. At least, covenant is based on God's offering of such love and desire for a reciprocal response from us, and also on human aspiration to love God thus—even if that aspiration is unstable. But the Satan says there is no such thing as selfless love, and that means that the whole notion of covenant is nothing more than divine delusion. So when this naively told "folktale" is heard in the context of covenant theology, it is evident that what is at stake is the central claim of Israel's faith.

To test this claim, Job is methodically stripped of his herds and flocks, his servants, his sons and daughters. And sure enough, Job blesses the name of YHWH (1:21). Next, the sores that cover his body from head to foot make him a social outcast and seem to mark him as hated by God, yet Job says nothing at all. The silence is eerie, intolerable, and Job's wife rebels against it. She offers Job the words that will bring an end to his misery: "You still cling to your integrity? Curse God and die!" (2:9). Post-biblical Christian tradition has often made Mrs. Job out to be an unsympathetic shrew who imperils his soul. (The fourth-century Greek theologian St. John Chrysostom said that Job's greatest trial was that his wife was *not* taken.) But there is another way of hearing her words. Maybe she is not mocking his famous integrity at all, but rather appealing to it as the only fitting end to this divinely inflicted misery. "You still have a hold on your integrity. It's the one thing you have left, so put it to use. Your integrity demands that you curse the God who allowed our children to die." But Job refuses that way out. He answers curtly, "You're speaking as one of those who are spiritually unaware would speak. Shall we receive good at the hand of God and not receive evil?" The storyteller hints that there is now something ominous in Job's silence: "In all this, Job did not sin *with his lips*" (2:10)—a cautious statement, considering

that earlier we were told he did not sin at all (1:22). The ancient rabbis inferred that with this, Job's first question, he had already begun to sin in his heart.[1] Now for the first time, Job has named God as the Source of evil.

It is well to note with care the silences in this book, for if its subject is good theology, what it means to "speak accurately about [God]" (42:8), then it must tell us something also about silence. It is odd to say that the most long-winded book in the Bible is about silence. Yet accurate speech about anything, and especially about God, is in fact a rhythm of silence and speech, speaking and listening. We come close to the central message of this book by following that rhythm, for by it Job's pain is gradually transformed into wholeness and peace.

The most important thing about Job's silence is that he does not remain alone in it. He is joined by three friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—who hear of Job's affliction and come from far off to comfort him.

> And they lifted up their eyes from a distance but could hardly recognize him. And they lifted up their voices and wept, and each one tore his robe and they threw dust over their heads into the air. And they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights without speaking a word to him, for they saw how great was his pain. (2:12-13)

Those seven days of silence are surely one of the most influential acts of pastoral care ever performed. The Jewish practice of "sitting *shiva*" (literally "sitting seven," when friends come to sit with mourners at home over the period of a week) memorializes the friends' wise compassion in this long moment of shared grief. More than twenty-five hundred years after the book of Job was written, this one act of Job's companions is imitated on a daily basis by comforters

all over the world. Silence kept with others has a special quality. It is like a fine veil, preserving separateness, yet strangely heightening mutual awareness. Silence requires us to be present to the unexpressed needs of others, needs of which they may themselves not yet know. Cultivating the habit of silence should be seen as one of the special responsibilities of Christian community in a noisy world. It is a powerful means of fostering mutual encouragement among us, whom God has entrusted to one another in this wilderness of pain and doubt.

That week of shared silence is a period of transition for Job. In it he finds the words to speak his whole mind, to admit the pain of all that he has suffered. Considered in a pastoral context, "admitting pain" means two things. First, it means opening up a place for pain to do its work in our lives and then subside. Second, it means speaking honestly of pain, admitting it not just to ourselves but also to God, speaking our suffering as part of the confession of faith. Silence allows pain to penetrate our heart, "deep calling to deep" (Psalm 42:8). Silence comes to us in grief as the comforter of whom we are afraid, for it invites us more deeply into ourselves, into the dark places in which doubts emerge and pain becomes fully perceptible, where loss can no longer be denied. Silence is the friend who challenges us to be healed when we wish simply to be soothed. It heals us first by making us more empty, carving a space within our hearts, challenging us to—what? Trust that God will use that space and fill it with new life? No—Job's story forces us to put the matter more sharply. Trusting God is often a central preoccupation of the biblical writers, but not in this book. Rather, silence pushes Job to *challenge* God. When Job finds words at last, he demands steadily that God enter the abyss of loss and be revealed to him there.

Holding on Hard:
Job's Lament (Chapters 3-31)

The crowning blow to all Job's bitter losses is the intolerance of his friends. It is a tragic irony that they are unable to bear the words that their silent companionship helped him to find. Yet they should not be greatly blamed. Maybe in all literature, there are no more bitter words than those that fester and burst out of Job's silence:

> Why did I not die in the womb,
> emerge from the belly and expire?
> Why did knees receive me,
> and breasts give me suck? . . .
> Why does [God] give light to the wretched,
> and life to the bitter of soul;
> who wait for death—in vain;
> and dig for it rather than buried treasure;
> who would rejoice exceedingly,
> exult that they had found a grave? . . .
> For my sighs are my food;
> my groaning pours out like water. . . .
> I have no rest, no quiet, no repose;
> turmoil has come. (3:11-12, 20-22, 24, 26)

There is something typically Israelite about the fact that Job's outburst begins with a repeated question, as he bitterly mimics the three-year-old's insistent "why": "Why didn't I die stillborn? Why does God give life to the bitter-hearted?" Job was a pious man before his tragedy, a godly man but not yet truly wise, for he did not know how much he did not understand. The radical not-knowing in his questions is the beginning of his wisdom.

Like any committed complainer, Job wants to lodge his accusations and demands directly with the responsible party. At the very beginning Job complains *about* God to his

friends, but he very quickly gives up the third-party approach and lambasts God head-on. Here his questioning takes the form of a chilling parody of a well-known psalm (Psalm 8), one that praises the benevolent Creator for the unlikely mercy of caring about human beings. Finding no mercy, Job wishes God cared less:

> What is man that you make so much of him,
> and set your heart upon him;
> inspect him every morning,
> test him each moment? Will you never turn your
> gaze from me,
> let me be till I swallow my spit? (7:17-19)

He goes on:

> Your hands fashioned and made me,
> and now you have turned and destroyed me.
> Remember, like clay you molded me;
> will you turn me back to dust? . . .
> But this you hid in your heart
> (I know that this was your plan):
> If I should sin, you would be watching me,
> and not clear me of my offense! (10:8-9, 13-14)

From a theological standpoint, Job and his visitors have much common ground. They all hold the same belief system; they are committed to the idea that the universe operates according to a system of just deserts. The initial point of difference between Job and the others is that Job identifies a glitch in the system: he maintains that he is being punished in gross disproportion to any wrong he ever did. Although they begin with the same theological principle, Job and his would-be counselors develop it in very different ways. For Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar are academic theologians of the most speculative kind. They imagine that they can read God

like a book, and so they presume to tell Job precisely what God is doing, namely, disciplining or punishing him. But Job refuses absolutely to buy into their pat theories. Beginning in chapter 3 and almost to the very end of the book, Job will do his theological thinking at the top of his lungs, directing his shouts to God's face. His accusations are tactless, furious—yet in the end God will say that Job "has spoken accurately about me" (42:7-8), while his companions stand in need of Job's prayer precisely for their worthless prattling. In fact, the companions do say some things that sound like good theology. We even read excerpts from their speeches from time to time in church, and call it "the Word of the Lord." Yet the final divine judgment on them is that they are totally off base, because they are trying to talk *about* God without engaging in the fearsome, always potentially disorienting business of talking directly *to* God. Therefore their words can only "bloom like cut flowers."[2] When God speaks out of the whirlwind, they all blow away.

The protracted arguments of Job's interlocutors may well bore us, and probably they should. It is like watching Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot:* nothing changes and no one moves forward. By the end of the play, if you are not faint with the excruciating tedium of it all, then you missed the point. For anyone who hopes to bring comfort to a person in pain, the lesson to be derived from this long central section of Job is mostly negative: our role as comforters is not to solve the problem of pain; even less is it to stick up for God. Trying to vindicate God to a person in agonizing pain is like explaining to a crying infant that Mommy is really a well-intentioned person. The friends' words do not help Job. Nonetheless, something does begin to happen as they rehearse their arguments. While the others remain mired in their convictions, Job is moving. Though immersed in pain, he is not stuck. What goads and guides him through his pain

is simply the determination not to let God off the hook for a moment. Eventually Job's determination to hold God accountable to himself becomes his hope of redemption:

> I know that my Redeemer lives, . . .
> and from my flesh [without my flesh?][3] I shall gaze
> on God,
> upon whom I shall gaze for myself—
> and my eyes see, and not a stranger. (19:25-27)

What, after all, generates Job's hope of seeing God, when nothing has changed for him, when no one has brought him any real comfort? This book of Job hints at a strange truth that is never explained, and probably cannot be explained: the full admission of pain opens the door to hope. The Peruvian poet Cesar Vallejo writes about a pain so simple, so consuming, that it has "neither a father nor a son"—no cause, no explanation. It illumines nothing and produces no insight. The prose-poem is an unbroken lament. It ends with the words: "Today I am in pain, no matter what happens. Today I am simply in pain." Yet Vallejo gives his poem a title that points beyond the lament. It is called "I am going to talk about hope."[4] Maybe the very act of finding words for pain—and especially beautiful words, like those of Vallejo and the Joban poet—breeds hope, hope that someone (Someone?) is listening and might care.

Initially, Job says that it is hopeless to argue with God:

> If one wanted to contend with him,
> one could not answer him one time out of a
> thousand. . . .
> Even if I am innocent, my own mouth would
> condemn me;
> I am a person of integrity, but he would make me
> perverse. (9:3, 20)

Yet Job keeps talking, and gradually he grows in confidence that he can make his case:

> Look, I have set my case in order;
> I know that I am in the right....
> Call, and I myself shall answer;
> or I shall speak, and you respond to me. (13:18, 22)

The next step is his growing hope that there is indeed Someone to corroborate his case:

> Even now, look, in the heavens is my witness,
> and the one who testifies for me is in the heights.
> (16:19)

Slowly and fitfully, Job's hope of making his case before God grows. Often he lapses back into despair. But his movement in and through pain may be measured also by the expansion of his vision beyond his own personal situation. Although he begins in fetal position, wishing himself back into nonexistence, he opens his eyes to see that his agony is not unique. The suffering of the innocent is in fact rampant—something he did not notice so much when he himself was fortunate. So Job gradually moves from fetal position to prophetic stance, denouncing the ease and prosperity of the wicked (21:7-34). Now his own suit is part of a larger case for the cause of the just (24:1-25), for whom he is the bold spokesman:

> Even today my speech is defiance;
> [God's] hand is heavy despite my groaning.
> If only I knew where to find him,
> I would come to his tribunal.
> I would lay my case before him and fill my mouth
> with arguments....
> Would he use great force to contend with me?
> No, surely he would heed me.

> There the upright could reason with him,
> and I would finally be acquitted in my suit.
> (23:2-4, 6-7)

The divine Judge from whom Job expects acquittal is, of course, the same God whom he accuses of injustice. With a passion for justice instilled by God, he turns the prophetic demand for vindication of the righteous *against* God. Here is the acute paradox that lies at the heart of this book, and also the reason the church is afraid of it: Job rails against God, not as a skeptic, not as a stranger to God's justice, but precisely as a believer.[5] It is the very depth of Job's commitment to God's ethical vision that makes his rage so fierce, and that will finally compel an answer from God.

Goethe expresses a desperate but strong way of laying hold of God that is unknown to most contemporary Christians:

> And so at last the sailor lays firm hold
> upon the rock on which he had been dashed.[6]

We are not accustomed to blaming God, and so when we find ourselves doing so, we feel guilty and religiously confused. The "solution," for some, is to cover our confusion about God with a false piety. Others, bolder perhaps, will give up on God altogether. But the witness of the book of Job is that rage and even blame directed at God are valid moments in the life of faith. Further, the very fact that Job's outcry extends over so many chapters tells us that we may stay in that "moment" for a long time.

Some few believers in every generation have always lived in the acute paradox of holding on to God, and at the same time blaming God for their suffering. In the present age, probably those who have struggled most courageously and faithfully with this are Jews, whom the deadly storm of the Holocaust[7] has cast upon God the Rock (Psalm 19:15).

Yosl Rakover Talks to God is one modern expression of that dangerous rage of the faithful. It is the last testament of a fictional Jew dying in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising.

> I die at peace, but not pacified, conquered and beaten but not enslaved, bitter but not disappointed, a believer but not a suppliant, a lover of God but not His blind Amen-sayer.
>
> I have followed Him, even when he pushed me away. I have obeyed His commandments, even when He scourged me for it. I have loved him, I have been in love with Him and remained so, even when He made me lower than the dust, tormented me to death, abandoned me to shame and mockery....
>
> Here, then, are my last words to You, my angry God: None of this will avail you in the least! You have done everything to make me lose my faith in you, to make me cease to believe in You. But I die exactly as I have lived, an unshakeable [sic] believer in You.[8]

Job ends his lament by relapsing into a deep silence immediately after he concludes his lengthy final defense speech (chapters 29–31). Having demolished the contention of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar that Job is grossly, albeit secretly, wicked, he will not be provoked to further words by any "quack doctors" of theology (13:4). The newcomer Elihu shows up and, disgusted with the failure of the others to refute Job, he offers a half-dozen chapters of his own theology of suffering, some of it quite good. But still Job says nothing. He will not speak again until theology has been renewed from the Source.

God's Speech and Job's Transformation
(Chapters 38-42)

God begins the renewal of speech about God's ways exactly as Job began his complaint, with a series of questions:

> Who is this who darkens design
> by words without knowledge?
> Gird your loins like a hero;
> I will ask you; now you tell me! Where were you
> when I founded the earth?
> Tell me if you have understanding:
> who fixed its dimensions—surely you know!
> Or who stretched out over it a measuring line?
> (38:2-5)

Many readers see God's answer from the whirlwind as pure bluster and no answer at all. God just rolls out that big Creation Machine and mows Job down with a stream of *non sequiturs* that have nothing to do with what is really at stake. If Job finally stops talking altogether, then it is not because he is persuaded by anything God has said, but simply because there is no point in arguing with a bully.

It is true that God does not give a direct answer to Job's urgent suit about the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the innocent, nor even bother to refute Job's implied charge of mismanagement in the moral sphere. On the contrary, God agrees that the persistence of the wicked is a knotty problem—and if Job can figure out how to get rid of them, then bully for him:

> Then even I will praise you,
> that your right hand has won you victory!
> Look now, here's Behemoth, whom I made along
> with you. (40:14-15)

God simply passes over the moral issue as Job has posed it and directs his attention elsewhere, to something that seems to interest God more just now, namely, the non-human elements of the universe. The two great poems that constitute God's speech offer Job a completely different view of reality, a God's-eye view of the world that takes no direct account of his own personal situation. Yet in the end, Job acknowledges that he has seen God and, further, that he is satisfied with God's response to his suit. Job's one unyielding claim, held to the bitter end of his lament (27:5), is that he is indeed "a man of integrity" (1:1), as God said at the very beginning. The divine speeches do at the end uphold that claim—but they do so obliquely, in the manner typical of poetry. Yet at the same time, they completely transform Job's own understanding of what his integrity must entail.

The Rabbis have a saying: "The question of a wise person is half an answer." How much more so, when the One asking questions is the only One, as the book of Job tells us, who really knows where wisdom is to be found (28:20-28)?

> Who cut for the torrent a channel,
> and a path for the thunderbolts;
> to make it rain on earth with not a person in it,
> desert with no one there,
> to satisfy the wild waste
> and bring forth a crop of grass? (38:25-27)

"To make it rain on earth with not a person in it"—that one phrase says a lot about the way God runs things. And what it says is a calculated offense to ordinary human expectations. Remember that in ancient Israel, life depended directly on the precarious, never-too-abundant rainfall. No one wastes water in the arid climate of the Middle East—no one except God. God relishes extravagant gestures, as does Cyrano de Bergerac, but goes him one better. Cyrano flings a purse of

gold coins at the crowd; God flings rain on the desert, where no one even cheers. They do it for kicks.

Just about as sensible as watering the wasteland is God's delight in the wild creatures. He proudly displays the mountain goats that give birth in impenetrable recesses, the desert ass that roams far from the herdsman's shout, the wild ox that scorns to plow a field, the silly happy ostrich. All these creatures in the divine photo album have one thing in common: they are completely untamable. Every animal in which God glories is utterly useless, except the war horse, and that is the exception that proves the rule. You may use him, God says of the snorting horse impatient for battle, but don't imagine you can master him!

This God's-eye view of the world plays havoc with Job's notion of the way things ought to be—which is to say, sensible, well-adapted to human purposes, and above all, predictable. From the beginning we see that Job is extraordinarily punctilious in his religious observances. He is "God-fearing" in the extreme. Remember those preemptive sacrifices that Job used to offer each year on behalf of his children, *just in case* they had sinned (1:5)? Again, his final defense speech shows Job to be a self-consciously exemplary husband and father, a man who is kind to the poor, true to God, and responsible in looking out for his servants—which, we might infer, is more than God can say.

Job is convinced that his moral innocence should have warded off disaster, because he believes that the world is a manageable place run by a demanding but nonetheless predictable God who owes the righteous a good time. But when God finally speaks and shows Job what, from a divine perspective, is so fascinating about the created order, it turns out to have nothing at all to do with human moral standards. Here, for instance, is the ostrich, who forgets where her own eggs are buried and steps right on them—but when she flies,

there's a sight! She is the comic book anti-type to Job's own anxious style of parenting.

God's involvement with the world expresses itself in huge, unapologetic delight in a creation whose outstanding quality is quite simply magnificence: power and freedom on a scale that is bewildering and terrifying. The great symbols of that magnificence are, of course, Leviathan and Behemoth. From a human perspective, they are monstrous aberrations: an overblown crocodile and a customized hippo. Modern commentators often compare them to ancient Near Eastern chaos monsters, the troublemakers in the universe, who must be destroyed in order to make the world habitable for decent creatures like us. But that is hardly how God sees these big guys. They are, it seems, the top of the creation line, and God speaks of them with intense pride. Behemoth, God tells Job, is "the best thing I ever did" (40:19); and every one of Leviathan's scales was set in place with the same exquisite care (41:15-17) that fashioned Job in the womb.

Now why should God love a world like that? Annie Dillard provides an excellent answer: because "the creator loves pizzazz." She is reflecting not on Leviathan and Behemoth, but on all their strange kin who share the world with us:

> The world is full of creatures that for some reasons seem stranger to us than others, and libraries are full of books describing them—hagfish, platypuses, lizardlike pangolins four feet long with bright green, lapped scales like umbrella-tree leaves on a bush hut root, butterflies emerging from anthills, spiderlings wafting through the air clutching tiny silken balloons, horseshoe crabs... the creator creates. Does he stoop, does he speak, does he save, succor, prevail? Maybe. But he creates; he creates everything and anything. The creator goes off on one wild, specific tangent after another, or millions simultaneously, with an exuberance that would seem to be unwarranted, and with an abandoned energy sprung from an unfathomable font. What is going on here? The point of the dragonfly's terrible lip, the giant water bug, birdsong, or the beautiful dazzle and flash of sunlighted minnows, is not that it all fits together like clockwork—for it doesn't, not even inside the goldfish bowl—but that it all flows so freely wild, like the creek, that it all surges in such a free, fringed tangle. Freedom is the world's water and weather, the world's nourishment freely given, its soil and sap: and the creator loves pizzazz.[9]

I quote at length because this is a point we are slow to get. We are so accustomed to thinking of God in sober terms. We are comfortable talking about God's sound *moral* character—"merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6). But the idea that God might have *aesthetic* preferences is strange; it seems frivolous, beneath God's dignity. Yet the speech out of the whirlwind would seem to suggest that God does indeed exhibit a certain style, and admire it in the creatures. Moreover, God's moral and aesthetic preferences belong together. Love of pizzazz is compatible with an aspect of God's moral character with which we are familiar: God's self-giving generosity. What God shows Job is the highest form of causality operative in the universe, the generosity that brings another into free being. Yet it costs something truly to delight in the freedom of the beloved, as any parent knows. The Bible as a whole gives us a fairly good idea of what it costs God to create and preserve a world of creatures who are beautiful—and dangerous—precisely in their unpredictability.

And what does all this mean for Job's case? Job has long clung to his "integrity" (27:5), by which he meant being responsible within his own social sphere. But now that God has given this guided tour of the creation, the whole project of human integrity looks different. It means fitting into a design vastly bigger and more complex than Job ever imagined. What God says, in effect, is this: "Look away from yourself, Job; look around you. For a moment see the world with my eyes, in all its intricacy and wild beauty. The beauty is in the wildness, Job; you cannot tame all that frightens you without losing the beauty." God calls this man of integrity to take his place in a ravishing but dangerous world where only those who relinquish their personal expectations can live in peace. The price of peace is the surrender of our personal expectations, which are always too small for the huge freedom built into the system.

The great question that God's speech out of the whirlwind poses for Job and every other person of integrity is this: Can you love what you do not control? That implied question is only another form of the one that the Satan put to God at the very beginning: "Is it for no good reason that Job serves God?" The shocking revelation out of the whirlwind is that God gets a kick out of doing things for no good reason at all—making it rain on the desert, for instance, with no one there. The truth that Job never suspected is that gratuitousness is one of the hidden values of creation.

Job's answer to that revelation is a deepening of silence. Citing God's earlier questions (see 38:2-3, page 135), he now acknowledges the insufficiency of all his words:

> "Who is this who obscures design without
> knowledge?"
> Yes, I talked but did not understand,
> of things too wondrous for me, that I did not know.
> "Listen now and I will speak; I will ask and you
> tell me!"[10]
> I had heard of you by hearsay,
> but now my eye has seen you.
> Therefore I recant and change my mind
> concerning dust and ashes. (42:3-6)

These last two lines are crucial for understanding what has happened to Job. The verse is generally translated along these lines:

> therefore I despise myself,
> and repent in dust and ashes. (NRSV)

Yet the Hebrew verb translated "repent" denotes any kind of mental and emotional reorientation, either positive or negative; "repentance" is only one possibility. Moreover, the phrase "dust and ashes" always appears in the Bible as a metaphor, not as a reference to literal dust heaps. The metaphor consistently designates the humbleness of the human condition, seen in light of God's majesty (see Genesis 18:27). Therefore, it is highly unlikely that Job is abasing himself before God here, as the traditional translation suggests. If Job now has little to say, then this is the silence not of self-disgust, but of desire fulfilled. Job has gotten what he most wanted: he has seen God. And as a result he takes a new view of the human condition and of his own place in the world. Job's silence at the end of the book bespeaks his spiritual transformation. It is not only his theology that is renewed; it is his whole mind.

In fact, the clearest expression of the renewal of Job's mind is not anything he says. It is his willingness to have more children. I have heard it said in modern Israel that the most courageous act of faith the Jews have ever performed was to have babies after the Holocaust, to trust God with more defenseless children. The note at the end of the book

that Job had seven sons and three daughters is often considered to be a cheap parting shot—as though God could make it all up by giving Job another set of children to replace the ones who were lost. But that is to judge the last scene of the book from the wrong side. This book is not about justifying God's actions; it is about Job's transformation. It is useless to ask how much (or how little) it costs God to give more children. The real question is how much it costs Job to become a father again. How can he open himself again to the terrible vulnerability of loving those whom he cannot protect against suffering and untimely death?

Of course, we never get a direct answer to that question. But here is a hint that tells us something about what kind of father Job becomes, after all his grief. It is in the strange detail about him naming his daughters: "He called the name of the one *Yemima* (Dove) and the name of the second *Ketsia* (Cinnamon) and the name of the third *Keren-haPuch* (Horn of Eye-Shadow)" (42:14). Sensuous names are not the biblical norm, and naming a daughter for a cosmetic is way over the top. But there is more: "And there were not to be found throughout the whole land women as beautiful as Job's daughters, and their father gave them an inheritance alongside their brothers" (42:15). In the male-dominated societies of the ancient world, it is an affront for a father blessed with many sons to leave anything to daughters. So once-cautious Job is now overturning all the rules, and as for a reason—well, the only thing we know is that Dove, Cinnamon, and Horn of Eye-Shadow were exceptionally pretty women. Which is to say, Job does it for no good reason at all. He does it just for kicks.

The two portraits of Father Job that stand at either end of this book mark the true measure of his transformation. Job, this man of integrity who was once so careful, fearful of God and of the *possible* sins of his children, becomes at the last

freewheeling, breaking with custom to honor daughters alongside sons, bestowing inheritances and snappy names. The inspiration and model for this wild style of parenting is, of course, God the Creator. Job learned about it when God spoke out of the whirlwind. And now Job loves with the abandon characteristic of God's love—revolutionary in seeking our freedom, reveling in the untamed beauty of every child.

Notes

1. Talmud, Baba Batra 16a.
2. The phrase comes from Karl Barth's luminous interpretation of Job: *Church Dogmatics,* vol. IV/3.1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961), 457.
3. The Hebrew poetry of this line (like many others in the book of Job) is ambiguous and open to several interpretations. It is not clear whether Job expects to see God before or after his own death.
4. Robert Bly, ed., *Neruda and Vallejo: Selected Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 243.
5. This is the insight of Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* IV/3.1, 404.
6. Goethe, *Tasso,* quoted by Karl Barth, ibid., 424.
7. The modern Hebrew term used to designate the Nazi Holocaust is *sho'ah.* In the Bible, the word denotes a great storm.
8. Zvi Kolitz, *Yosl Rakover Talks to God,* trans. Carol Brown Janeway (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 23-24.
9. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 136-137.
10. This could also be a citation of Job's own bold call to God in 13:22.