

Humility

Job 42:1-6

April 15, 2018

*When I look at the sky which you have made,
the moon and stars that you set in place:
Where do human beings fit in the picture?
What are we?*

What are we?

Are we evolution's crowning achievement? Are we the unquestioned masters of this planet, beings of unmatched power and ambition, eager to fulfill our self-proclaimed destiny to become masters of the universe? Isn't that our dream? To overcome, to subdue, to triumph, to tame the universe itself?

Or are we merely the random outcome of a particular genetic mutation, a species bent on self-destruction, existing only for the briefest of moments in one tiny corner of this vast universe, a universe for all we know, or for all we don't know, may itself be just one tiny speck in all that is? Do we matter? Do we matter to anybody or anything other than ourselves? Or is our overblown self-importance merely a byproduct of our narrow perspective -- we don't know any better because we just don't know?

What are we?

Pascal said this:

What sort of freak [are human beings]! How novel, how monstrous, how chaotic, how paradoxical, how prodigious! Judge of all things, feeble earthworm, repository of truth, sink of doubt and error, glory and refuse of the universe!

Is he right?

Novel? Yes. In all our exploring, we have never found anything quite like ourselves.

Monstrous? Auschwitz. Pol Pot's killing fields. Assad's chemical weapons. Antietam. Hiroshima. Golgotha.

Paradoxical? Oh, yes. We split an atom and use the knowledge to build weapons of mass destruction. We unleash energy from under the earth's surface enabling our rapid development as a civilization but in so doing threaten the earth itself and all who live on it. We connect people all over the world through marvelous technologies and then use those technologies to collect data to manipulate and exploit people all over the world.

Prodigious? Yes! We have filled this earth with over seven billion of our kind. We have touched the moon and peered into the deepest ocean valleys. We have

built over 11,000,000 miles of paved roads and farm a full 40% of the earth's land surface.

Feeble earthworm? Is that all we are? No more than a feeble earthworm? What do you think? When it comes down to it, are we closer in kind to an earthworm or to God?

We heard from the book of Job this morning Job's answer to the Lord at the climax of the book. The book of Job is about identity, about human identity. Who are we? What are we? Yes, the book raises the problem the problem of suffering, of undeserved suffering, but the book offers no answers as to why we suffer. Its author is much more interested in why we think we need answers, or, more specifically, in the kinds of answers we think we need.

Job's friends had their answer. They knew why he suffered. They knew it was all about sin. You sin, you suffer. You do right, God blesses you. It's that clear. It's that simple.

Only Job knew it wasn't that simple. His suffering wasn't about sin at all, and about that, he was right. Job was right about many things. He was right to complain to God, because it wasn't fair. He was right to demand an audience with God, because God alone could answer his questions. God alone could bring him comfort in his grief.

And this was his comfort: "Now I have seen you with my own eyes." Seeing the Lord, knowing the Lord, was the comfort, not getting any answers. His friends gave him answers. His friends told him what he needed to do to control his own destiny. They told him how to bargain with God. But Job found no answers. His "answer" was his own ignorance, his comfort was his own "powerlessness," and his glory, the glory of being human, was his humility.

*But now I have seen you with my own eyes.
So I am ashamed of all I have said
and repent in dust and ashes ...*

"Repent in dust and ashes." Not repenting of sin, because Job had no sin, but repenting, acknowledging, owning his humanness, standing down before God simply because God is God and he, Job, is dust and ashes, but knowing, too, that in the presence of God, to be dust and ashes, is glory!

God has made us what we are. We are dust and ashes, creatures fashioned by God out of dust and ashes, or, if you want to put it more scientifically, out of carbon and phosphorus. We are creatures, that is our frailty, But we are creatures, created ones, and that is our glory.

Humility is the virtue of clear-sightedness, of honesty, of knowing that God is God and we are not. We are creatures, utterly dependent on God, most at home, most ourselves, when we out our trust entirely in God.

Humility is another word for faith. Faith is not knowing something, not a thing in which we can take pride because we are those "in the know." No, faith is

knowing someone, knowing the God on whom we depend. Faith is entrusting ourselves absolutely to the love and goodness of God. Faith is humbling ourselves and walking the path of obedience all the way. That's what Job did, and that's why God commended him and scolded his friends.

Learn from Job how to be humble! Humility doesn't mean keeping your head down and staying quiet. Job was far from quiet. He addressed the Lord boldly and because of his boldness he got what he wanted, an audience with God.

Humility does not mean holding back or disparaging yourself, but it does mean not thinking yourself to be any more than you are. The root of all sin, and the cause of all our human folly, is pride. When I say pride, I am not talking about self-confidence. You can be confident and humble. In fact, I don't think you can be truly humble without having confidence. And when I say pride I am not talking about taking reasonable pride in your work.

The pride that is the root of all that is wrong with us is the pride of wanting to be what we are not and can never be, wanting to be God. That is our temptation, that is our original sin: "Eat the fruit from this tree and you will be like God!" We want to be God. We want to be our own gods -- finding our own way, setting our own rules, doing what we want to do, going the way we want to go, depending only on ourselves, relying only on ourselves, trusting only in ourselves.

God says; "Do not kill." But we decide that in certain situations, under certain circumstances, it becomes necessary to take life, in order to preserve our own, in order to protect our way of life, in order to defend ourselves against those who pose a threat. We decide. We decide, and we fill the earth with war.

God says: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." But we decide that's ok as far as it goes, as long as you work out who is a worthy neighbor and who is not, and as long as you aren't expected to help those who don't do a thing to help themselves. We decide. We decide, and we fill the earth with strangers and enemies.

Learn from Jesus how to be humble! He is the one who humbled himself and walked the path of obedience all the way. Was Jesus weak? Was he hesitant? Was he a pushover? Far from it! For Jesus being humble meant depending on God. doing God's will, doing what God called him to do no matter the cost.

Being humble means letting God be God and letting other people be other people. Other people, with hearts and minds and dreams and desires of their own. A person is a person is a person, never just part of the scenery, never just another prop in my story, never just a means for achieving my own ends.

Jesus didn't see faces in the crowd, he saw people. Jesus didn't hear background noise, he listened to what people had to say. He listened thoughtfully and listened with care and sometimes even his mind was changed by what he heard ... because he was humble. He knew he was a child of God, the child of God, but he knew that the one to whom he listened, each one to whom he listened, was a child of God, too.

Happy are those who are humble; they will receive what God has promised.

Arrogance brings alienation and grief, but humility brings happiness. Embracing the life we have, not trying to seize a life that is not ours, is happiness.

Happy are the pure in heart; they will see God!

Jesus saw God. He didn't merely know about God, he knew God. Job saw God: "In the past I knew only what others had told me, but now I have seen you with my own eyes." And when you are humble, when you are clear-eyed and honest about yourself, when you are pure in heart, you will see God.

If you are pure in heart. Not pure. Not unblemished. Not wholly right. But pure in heart. Purity of heart, Kierkegaard said, is to want one thing. To want one thing. To want one thing ...

If you want God, like Jesus wanted God, like Job wanted God, you will have what you want.