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Job 38:1-11, Mark 4:35-41  
The Majesty, But Also the Tenderness of God's Providence

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>38</sup>But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care if we perish?" (Mark 4:38, RSV)

Jesus had spent the day in preaching. His congregation had been so large and had pressed upon him so closely that he had gotten into a boat and preached from there (Mark 4:1). Blessed boat, to serve as a pulpit for the Prince of Preachers! Now, in today's Gospel story, it is evening and Jesus has requested that his disciples cross over to the other side of the sea. As for Jesus himself, he seems worn out and falls asleep in the stern of the boat. A great storm comes up and the disciples awaken Jesus with their question, "Do you not care if we perish?"

This was no naïve question. There was learning behind it. Peter and Andrew, James and John: these were fishermen, with the ways of the sea dwelling in their bones and DNA, with instincts honed by generations upon the water. They knew how to fight a raging sea. They also knew when they were overmatched. So, they woke their master up and spoke of perishing.

Pity the seafarers in a raging sea.

## THE EDMUND FITZGERALD

On November 10, 1975, a Great Lakes freighter named the SS Edmund Fitzgerald sank in Lake Superior during a November storm, taking the lives of all 29 crew members. Gordon Lightfoot back then wrote a song about it you might remember. Here is one the verses.

When supertime came the old cook came on deck sayin'.  
"Fellas, it's too rough t'feed ya."  
At seven P.M. a main hatchway caved in; he said,  
"Fellas, it's bin good t'know ya!"  
The captain wired in he had water comin' in  
and the good ship and crew was in peril.  
And later that night when 'is lights went outta sight  
came the wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald.

The old cook is like the disciples in this evening's story. He knows the ways of the sea. If the sea becomes too violent, nature takes over and all is lost.

Then the song continues with a verse that is very much in the spirit of this morning's First Lesson, from Job. It is a verse wondering about the love of God:

Does any one know where the love of God goes  
when the waves turn the minutes to hours?  
The searchers all say they'd have made Whitefish Bay  
if they'd put fifteen more miles behind 'er.  
They might have split up or they might have capsized;  
they may have broke deep and took water.  
And all that remains is the faces and the names  
of the wives and the sons and the daughters.

I have two aims in this sermon. First, I want to say that it is right to pray in the fashion of the disciples on the raging sea. They simply dash off to their Master and blurt out their need. Furthermore, it is even right to press questions such as the one the song raises:

Does any one know where the love of God goes  
when the waves turn the minutes to hours?

It is right, commendable, and even essential for faith that we bring even such wild prayers to the Lord, for in this life our faith is contested. We are vexed, exhausted, tempted, and opposed by the devil, who wants above all else to deprive us of faith. Prayer is our way to crawl back into faith.

Second, I want us to listen to the answer of the Lord to such heartfelt questions.

## **FIRST, THE BLURTED-OUT PRAYER**

First, let's consider the spontaneous prayer – the artless, blurted-out, desperate prayer of the disciples:

“Teacher, do you not care if we perish?” (Mark 4:38, RSV)

Let's begin by noting that Jesus himself was a man of prayer. Often he would withdraw to a quiet place apart – sometimes alone on a mountain – and spend the night in prayer.<sup>1</sup>

It is said of Jesus that he prayed with great emotion, with loud cries and tears:

<sup>7</sup>In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Matthew 14:23 – “And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come, he was there alone.”

able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. (Hebrews 5:7, NRSV)

Indeed, in the Garden of Gethsemane we are privileged to watch Jesus at prayer in his great hour of need: we read how he was in agony of soul, how sweat fell from his face, and how plainly he made his desires known:

<sup>41</sup>And he was withdrawn from them about a stone's cast, and kneeled down, and prayed, <sup>42</sup>Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done. <sup>43</sup>And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him. <sup>44</sup>And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground. (Luke 22:41-44, KJV)

Furthermore, Jesus instructed his disciples to pray in like manner. They are to pray with confidence that our heavenly Father cares for us and will grant our prayers – not just *listen* to the prayer, but, as Martin Luther insisted, *grant* the prayer, according to his divine wisdom and love:

<sup>7</sup>“Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. <sup>8</sup>For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. <sup>9</sup>Or what man of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? <sup>10</sup>Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? <sup>11</sup>If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:7-11, RSV)

You do not need to be a poet to pray. You do not need to be a genius or a saint. You need simply to bring your requests to God as a child brings requests to a parent.

In our Monday Evening Psalm Class, we have spent three years now listening to the Psalms. They are prayers. They are the great prayer book of Israel and the Church. In those Psalms you can find every kind of emotion and request and challenge of the Lord. Take them as models for your own prayers.

## **JOB**

And this brings me to our First Lesson, which is from the book of Job. A crucial note about this book is that after the wild ride of Job's laments and complaints, the Lord still considers Job to be a righteous man. Indeed, the Lord is

so pleased with the words of Job that he restored Job's prosperity, indeed, he doubled Job's prosperity and granted him long life afterwards.

Let's look at some of the details of Job's suffering and complaint. Job has lost everything. He has lost his prosperity, he has lost his children, he has lost his health. These blows come hammering against him in rapid succession. He has no season of peace between the blows -- a season in which he could regain his peace and sanity. No, the blows come fierce and strong.

Then Job brings his complaints against the Lord. He believes that he suffers unjustly. Let me lift up but a few passages from the heartbroken, eloquent man:

<sup>2</sup>If only my misery could be weighed,  
and all my ills be put together on the scales!  
<sup>3</sup>But they outweigh the sands of the seas:  
what wonder then if my words are wild? (Job 6:2-3, NJB)

<sup>1</sup>Is not human life on earth just conscript service?  
Do we not live a hireling's life?  
<sup>2</sup>Like a slave, sighing for the shade,  
or a hireling with no thought but for his wages,  
<sup>3</sup>I have months of futility assigned to me,  
nights of suffering to be my lot.  
<sup>4</sup>Lying in bed I wonder, 'When will it be day?'  
No sooner up than, 'When will evening come?'  
And crazy thoughts obsess me till twilight falls. (Job 7:1-4, NJB)

<sup>1</sup>My breathing is growing weaker  
and the gravediggers are gathering for me....  
<sup>11</sup>My days are over, so are my plans,  
my heart-strings are broken; (Job 17:1, 11, NJB)

<sup>20</sup>I cry to you, and you give me no answer;  
I stand before you, but you take no notice.  
<sup>21</sup>You have grown cruel to me,  
and your strong hand torments me unmercifully.  
<sup>22</sup>You carry me away astride the wind  
and blow me to pieces in a tempest.  
<sup>23</sup>Yes, I know that you are taking me towards death,  
to the common meeting-place of all the living.  
<sup>24</sup>Yet have I ever laid a hand on the poor  
when they cried out for justice in calamity?  
<sup>25</sup>Have I not wept for those whose life is hard,  
felt pity for the penniless? (Job 30:20-25, NJB)

For all such unrestrained pouring out of his heart to the Lord, the Lord took no offense, but counted Job a righteous man in full face of it. Let us learn from this: Our God is great God. He will not go to pieces over our honest turning to him. Piety does not necessitate polite nothings. It is *your* life. It is in *his* hands. So bring your earnest thoughts and petitions to our heavenly Father. Knock on heaven's door and earnestly seek divine help.

## **NOW, LET'S LISTEN TO THE LORD'S ANSWER**

So, I have been encouraging us to be people of prayer, following the example of Job, of the disciples in the boat on the raging sea, and of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Now, let's listen to the Lord's answer.

His answer to Job starts off in a rough way:

<sup>1</sup>Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind: <sup>2</sup>“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?  
<sup>3</sup>Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. (Job 38:1-2, RSV)

Imagine a pastor saying such a thing to the “wives and the sons and the daughters” of those lost in the wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald.

But the Lord's answer to Job is a long one. It is as if Job has pulled no punches in complaining to the Lord, and the Lord likewise answers Job in a forthright way.

The thing that strikes me about the divine answer to Job is the vast majesty of God's providence combined with the tenderness of it. Our assigned reading for today lifts up the majesty of the Lord's answer:

<sup>4</sup>Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. <sup>5</sup>Who determined its measurements -- surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? <sup>6</sup>On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, <sup>7</sup>when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy? (Job 38:4-7, RSV)

But the Lord's answer moves on from this grand beginning of God's creating to the details of God's providence even now. What do we mean by that word I have just used – God's “providence”? I mean God's continual care of creation. Indeed, I mean our God's continuing creation, so that we believe that God not only created heaven and earth in the beginning, but is *still* creating them.

So, the Lord reminds Job of divine providence, going on every minute, including these minutes of this sermon. The Lord, then, asks Job whether Job really knows the details of what the Lord is doing or is up to. Consider the mountain goats, for example:

<sup>1</sup>Do you know when mountain goats give birth?  
Have you ever watched deer in labour?  
<sup>2</sup>Have you ever counted the months that they carry their young?  
Do you know when they give birth? (Job 39:1-2, NJB)

Or, consider the birds of the air:

<sup>26</sup>Doth the hawk fly by thy wisdom,  
and stretch her wings toward the south?  
<sup>27</sup>Doth the eagle mount up at thy command,  
and make her nest on high?  
<sup>28</sup>She dwelleth and abideth on the rock,  
upon the crag of the rock, and the strong place.  
<sup>29</sup>From thence she seeketh the prey,  
and her eyes behold afar off. (Job 39:26-29, KJV)

Well, we all know in theory that the eagle has good eyesight and can “behold afar off.” But the Lord knows this more than “in theory.” He knows it intimately and continually. Indeed, the eagle sees and flies and does all through the strength and providence of our God.

The Lord goes on this manner, and bit by bit, Job begins to understand the immense, complex work of love by which our Maker is moving his creation on toward the Kingdom of God, where there is no more death, no more sighing, where the wolf dwells in peace with the lamb, and the knowledge of the will of the Lord fills every human heart.

The Lord’s answer works its grace in the heart of Job, and Job bends the knee before the Lord. He resolves henceforth to let God be God and to trust that in the end all will be well. Job’s words of submission go like this:

<sup>5</sup>Before, I knew you only by hearsay  
but now, having seen you with my own eyes,  
<sup>6</sup>I retract what I have said,  
and repent in dust and ashes. (Job 42:5-6, NJB)

## **OH, YES! HE CARES!**

In Jesus of Nazareth, a plain man from Nazareth, something is afoot even larger than a storm or any of this world’s powers, awesome though they truly are. Jesus himself is the mustard seed growing in the great bush giving shelter to the world. Jesus himself is the Master of wind and wave and so, of course, the sea leaps to obey its Lord and a great calm comes upon the waters.

“Do you not care that we perish?” ask the disciples Oh! Yes, dear ones. He cares. He cares enough to die for his disciples, for you, and for me. Easter means that he labors on, labors still, that thou shalt not perish! through the grace and

merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.