

Series Title: “Glad and Generous Hearts”

18 October 2015: 21st Sunday after Pentecost

FUMC—Arlington, TX 76011

“God Provides”—Preaching Text: Job 38:1-7 (34-41)

+++++

“Providence protects children and idiots. I know because I have tested it”

(Mark Twain).

+++++

Today we are trying to understand what it means to talk about giving with “Glad and Generous Hearts.” Mostly when anyone asks me for money or I decide I need to spend it, then my key feeling is fear. I am afraid I will not have enough to provide for my family, pay my bills, or have money left over for my wants, although not necessarily needs. We all confuse those so often—wants and needs! We are Christians and know that Jesus casts out the fear of death, the shame of sin, and the despair of failure by his death and resurrection. Via the generous gift of Jesus’ life, God reveals God’s loving heart. Why should we fear when the creator of the earth cares for us so deeply? Why?—because we are anxious, worried, and fearful. People like us ask questions mostly to reassure ourselves that God’s providence will provide for us.

We rarely tire asking deep theological questions. Perhaps, “Why do people suffer?” or “How can you love a sinner like me?” or even, “If you know everything God, then why tell you my problems in prayer?” We wrestle with questions to ask God. We have a list of queries to put to God when we meet God face to face. Yet, how often have we considered that God might have a list of questions to ask us? In fact deep in Job, Yahweh speaks out of the whirlwind. God confronts Job with this challenge (Job 38:2-7):

1 Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: 2 “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? 3 Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. 4 “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. 5 Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? 6 On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone 7 when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

34 “Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, so that a flood of waters may cover

you? 35 Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go and say to you, ‘Here we are’? 36 Who has put wisdom in the inward parts, or given understanding to the mind? 37 Who has the wisdom to number the clouds? Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens, 38 when the dust runs into a mass and the clods cling together? 39 “Can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions, 40 when they crouch in their dens, or lie in wait in their covert? 41 Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food” (Job 38:1-7 (34-41)?

Questions that God puts to Job allow humans to ponder life from many angles. For example, Brian Young offered a cartoon that reworked the “Where is Waldo?” theme. Waldo sits at a bar and remarks to no one in particular: “Nobody ever asks ‘How’s Waldo?’” The angle of our questions reveals the trajectory of our lives.

The Bible depicts God as a One who acts in history: God sends a flood, God converses with Abraham, God parts the waters for the Hebrews, God sends the Assyrians/Babylonians to destroy Israel and Judah for their sinfulness. Also, God is a moral agent. Everything God does is righteous. In Job, the Bible puts these assumptions about God to the test. Job’s suffering is of an innocent. Job challenges the very justice of God in ruling the universe. Job waits upon God to answer this challenge—which Job throws down with a series of questions.

But the answer out of the whirlwind that Job receives puts the justice issue on an entirely new plane. The story of Job shows God as creator of the universe whose wisdom and power surpass anything the human mind can grasp. God replies: “I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding” (38:3-4). In response, God’s disclosure of grandeur and majesty humbles Job: “I have uttered what I did not understand Therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (42:3, 6). But God’s answer to Job is not really an answer at all, is it? It poses a new question, i.e., whether human beings can even understand God and God’s ways (*Feasting on the Word*:

Year B, Volume 4).

When we are honest we know that we are merely mortal and that we do not even begin to

fathom the nature of God Almighty. Yet we are human and curious. We have other questions too. Like Job, we want to know why. Why did I get sick? Why was my son the one in that car wreck? Why did I get stuck with a job for the third time in a row that downsized? Why am I still living when all my friends are gone? No one can answer such questions, and no one needs to. Questions are more vital than answers. Why do ask why? Especially when we know good and well that there is no answer?

Job has spent much of the thirty-seven previous chapters asking why, in one form or another. Job's friends have blown hard trying to say why. God takes a huge risk that Job will never relate to God again, by responding, not about Job's "why" but about the grandeur, beauty, and order of the creation. If asking why is some feeble human attempt to get control of life and bring it to sense and better management, then God's response offers us even less control. In fact, our concerns are wholly minor to God's questions. God has a universe to run, and we are only one among many species. And yet in this reality, perhaps we humans can trust God's providence.

Will it be a comfort to Job to know that his concerns are absurdly minor in the grand scheme of things? Will Job get caught up in the wonder of creation and forget his sores? Will we ever see the triviality of many of our questions and issues? Can we trust in the God of all creation?

The utter indifference of nature to the concerns of human beings is the closest we come to grasping God's response here. Nature writers and poets marvel continually at the world's vagueness to human passions. "Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine," writes poet Mary Oliver. "Meanwhile the world goes on . . . meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air, are heading home again" (*Feasting on the Word*).

To be a person of "Glad and Generous Hearts" is to be a person who can stop living in fear and begin to trust God fully—basically letting our life follow our confession! The Holy Spirit opens the eyes of God's children so that we may see the blessings surrounding us. On our lips and in our hearts will be the songs of thanksgiving to God and our neighbors. "Let them

thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind” (Psalm 107:8).

Anxiety is no longer a singular state of being. It has become a chronic condition for many of us who live our entire life under a constant stress. We regularly wonder “What if” Anxiety is a natural part of our fight or flight response to the world around us. Yet, if we spend our whole lives in such a frantic state, then we can become frozen in fear and hiding.

The citizens of Feldkirch, Austria, didn’t know what to do. Napoleon’s massive army was preparing to attack. Soldiers had been spotted on the heights above the little town, which was situated on the Austrian border. A citizen’s council was hastily called to decide whether or not they should defend themselves or display the white flag of surrender. It was Easter Sunday, and the people had gathered at church.

The pastor said, “Friends, we have been counting on our own strength, and apparently we have failed. Today is the day of our Lord’s resurrection, let us simply ring the bells, have services as usual, and leave the matter in God’s hands. We know only our weakness, and not the power of God to defend us.” The council accepted his plan and the church bells rang. The enemy, hearing the sudden tolling, concluded that the Austrian army had arrived during the night to defend the town. Before the service ended, the enemy broke camp and left (Source Unknown). Sometimes our task is to do what we know and leave the rest to God.