

The Restaurant at the Beginning of the Universe

Job 38

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At such an august gathering of church musicians, we may be in a Presbyterian church, but at heart we are all Lutherans. I say that because, among the reformers, Luther had the highest view of music in the worship of the church. Calvin, our particular great-grandfather in the faith, mistrusted music in the church. Perhaps we can find some contemporary application of Calvin's suspicion, since Calvin did not want any forms of worship that relied upon emotional manipulation at the expense of right doctrine and the actual praise of God. Calvin once wrote, "...we find by experience that it has a sacred and almost incredible power to move hearts in one way or another. Therefore we ought to be even more diligent in regulating it in such a way that it shall be useful to us and in no way pernicious." In these days of emotionally manipulative praise songs with a good "hook" but not much content, we can appreciate Calvin's reticence.

There surely is no one in this room, however, who does not believe deeply that worship is not complete without music. That's obvious since, if your churches did not believe that, you would be out of your jobs! And as a preaching pastor, I treasure the partnership I share with our wonderful musicians. Each Sunday that I preach, it is the anthem that preaches to me. This is why I suggested that, when it comes to music, we are Lutherans at heart. Luther had a much higher view of music in worship than Calvin, or especially Zwingli. He believed that good music is the very sound of creation. Listen to what Luther wrote about church music, in his own colorful way:

when man's natural musical ability is whetted and polished to the extent that it becomes an art, then do we note with great surprise the great and perfect wisdom of God in music, which is, after all, His product and His gift; we marvel when we hear music in which one voice sings a simple melody, while three, four, or five other voices play and trip lustily around the voice that sings its simple melody and adorn this simple melody wonderfully with artistic musical effects, thus reminding us of a heavenly dance, where all meet in a spirit of friendliness, caress and embrace.

A person who gives this some thought and yet does not regard music as a marvelous creation of God, must be a clodhopper indeed and does not deserve to be called a human being; he should be permitted to hear nothing but the braying of asses and the grunting of hogs."

I must say that I have always been fascinated by the power of music. It is a miracle, of course, that strains of music written centuries ago can so readily leap off the page and come to life or, even more surprising, leap from the heart of Bach into the heart of the man, woman, or child in the pew today. Even more basically, how is it that a succession of sounds without words—say, Barber's *Adagio For Strings*—can send me into a completely separate place? I have wondered whether music could even be our closest connection to heaven itself. Or, as Luther suggests, it may even be an echo of the primordial first note of the Creation.

A bit ago we heard a reading from the story of Job. That book is a parable, really—a story told to explain that the problem of human suffering is so much more complex than previously thought. It was a corrective to a simplistic theology that claimed that, since sin led to suffering, people who suffer must be sinners. The logic doesn't work that way. That's why Job was written.

For 37 chapters, Job complains. If anyone ever lacked the patience of Job, it was Job. He goes on and on in a tirade about God's unfairness, demanding explanations of the divine. And then we come to this elegant 38th chapter, when God finally breaks silence and answers Job's complaint. It was an answer that may not have been

completely satisfying for Job, and it doesn't satisfy us either, because Job's questions end up answered by more questions; but God's questions have the effect of eliciting a new humility to Job. Like a Jewish father, God asks, in effect, Okay, smarty-pants. Where were you when I created the heavens and the earth? Why did I make an ostrich? Why would I bother to create a hippopotamus? If you understand all these things, were you around to hear the first booms of the creation? Gird your loins. Stand up to me. Be a man. Explain yourself.

The line I want you to think about today is God's question, "Where were you...when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?" In this one question, I believe that we can find the meaning of music, and the way in which music functions in the worship of the church.

The Job God addresses in this wonderful chapter is a product of a broken and fallen world. Before the fall, after all, the problem of suffering would have been a moot point. Job's problem is that he lives in an imperfect world, east of Eden. So do we all; and so we must wrestle with the eternal conundrum of a loving God and a suffering world. This is Job's most basic problem. And what God does, in asking this question, is to recall to Job's memory the recollection of another world. "Where were you?" God asks—as if to suggest that the memory of such a place and time were, after all, beyond Job's scope and experience. In effect, God says to Job, "Lo, I tell you a mystery."

The mystery that God recalls for Job is none other than the mystery of the creation—of those first, pristine days when God commanded light out of the darkness, when the waters were separated by the firmaments, and the stars spun into their places. God takes Job back to where it all began—when, in the morning of everything, the

morning stars sang for joy in their creator. Why does God do that? It may seem strange to us that God should respond to Job's problem—his boils and his grief and his economic losses—by talking about stars that sing!

What God's reply did for Job was something that is often the most helpful response to our human problems: God called Job back to the beginning, where it all started. It is only when we go back to the beginning that we make sense of the rest of the journey.

Here at Preston Hollow, we do regular Marriage Preparation seminars. We gather engaged couples together, and they talk about love and economics and sex and spirituality and communication, and all those other things that can make their marriages healthy.

One day, in one of those seminars, the couples were having a lively conversation about how to avoid becoming petty and small with each other. One couple suggested that they have a "secret word" they say when they lose their way and get frustrated with the little things. They said it works almost every time. We all wondered what on earth that word was, that had that kind of power. The secret word, it turned out, was the name of the restaurant where they had their first date! My wife and I have been trying that, and it works! Every time we get bogged down, one of us says, "Burger King," and everything is great!

But seriously, why does it work? Because it calls us back to the beginning—to the first, pristine days of falling in love, when we believed with all our hearts that love would conquer all, that we could climb every mountain and ford every stream, because we loved each other. Being called back to the beginning is to be reminded of who you

really are, and what's most important, and the important things that it would be a tragedy to overlook, because if we lose them, we've lost it all.

I think that's what God did for Job. In the face of all his difficulties and all his frustrations and all his struggles, what he got from God was not a pat answer but a memory—the recollection of that time, in the morning of it all, when it all began. That memory had the power to remind Job of who he was, and to whom his life belonged—and that is far better than all the easy answers in the world.

Now you may be wondering, what does that have to do with music and worship? I suggest that it has everything to do with it. I suggest to you that, every time we worship, every time we sing the songs of faith, we are being called back to where it all began. We are called to remember the stories that tell us that we are the beloved children of God, created in God's own image. We are called to remember that we are loved.

We said, a little earlier, that Martin Luther believed that music was closely linked with creation. Here is what he meant. When God created the heavens and the earth, everything was in order. Everything was in harmony. And when we “fell,” although perhaps we became most fully human, we also entered into a world of disorder and disharmony. And Luther said that, in this world of disorder and disharmony, there are two things capable of reminding us that there is another way, of recalling us to a vision of order and beauty; and those two things are theology informed by scripture, and music. That's right. Luther said that music, when linked hand in hand with good theology, has the capacity to create order in this world of chaos.

I know that all this may be a little heavy on a Monday afternoon after lunch. But it's really so simple and so beautiful. When life gets hard for all those people who come

to our churches on Sundays—when life gets hard for us, which it frequently does—we sing! And what we hear are nothing less than echoes of the songs the stars sang, back there where it all began.

So when we get petty and frustrated and confused...when we lose our way, our music calls us back to the place where it all began. Music is our secret word, and it helps us to recall the place, back there at the very beginning of the universe, where God first fell in love with us and even the stars sang for sheer joy.