***Beyond Belief***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on June 23, 2024*

*based on Job 38:1-7*

Years ago I was having a quiet Saturday morning breakfast in a favorite restaurant on the downtown strip in Ashland. I remember a man coming in, dressed in a dark suit -- kind of formal for a Saturday. He ordered a soft-boiled egg.

I remember this because the waiter brought it, the man tapped the egg with a quick staccato motion and BAMM, it exploded. The noise it made was so loud the cook came out of the kitchen, and here was this guy, impeccably dressed, covered with quivering white and yellow. The cook guided him, staggering, into the kitchen and sponged him off. He was pretty stunned.

The man came back to his booth. The cook asked him if he'd like another egg. "Yes," he said, "but this time . . . scramble it, okay?"

To live sanely each of us is tempted to believe a number of things about our world. We are tempted to believe that elevators never stall, our car's brakes will never fail, and soft-boiled eggs are harmless and will never explode in our faces.

The trouble is, parts in cars and elevators wear and sometimes innocent looking little white eggs from the grocery store have gas in them which, when heated, can turn a tiny egg into an ugly little bomb.

Every Gallop survey since 9-11 has determined that what Americans say they want most of all, more than love, success, or wealth is security.

That's not hard to believe. We want our world to be a very predictable place. Holiday Inn Corporation used to promise, "No Surprises" which appeals to our basic desire for predictability.

Well, the book of Job is about living with the temptation of believing just such a proposition.

Old Job has it made with his homes in Malibu and Aspen, his Swiss bank account, German cars, Italian clothes. That is, until God and a lieutenant of God’s named, Satan get together and everything Job values ends up in rubble: houses, servants, children, wine cellar; everything disappears but his wife.

 And, for heaven's sake, her one line in the whole story amounts to: "Why don't you just curse God and die.” Such a comfort.

If that's not bad enough Job's friends arrive, and after a suitable period of companionable silence, they start to talk. Worse than that, they quote scripture, weaponizing the Bible.

Verses like this one from Proverb’s, no doubt. “No ill ever befalls the righteous, but the wicked are full of trouble.” (Proverbs 12:21)

"Job," they're asking, "what have you done? Only bad people have bad things happen to them.” That is what they believe. Bad luck is God’s judgment on bad people.

They are eager **not** to be next in line for catastrophe, so they let Job know that he must have sinned a whopper to have lost everything.

But he hasn't, and Job refuses to submit to their self-serving diatribes. He will not plead guilty to crimes of which he knows he is innocent of just to preserve his friends' puny ideas about God.

"I want to speak my case to the Almighty," he says, shaking the dust and ashes off his sandals.

Soon he begins to sound much like one of Israel's great prophets in his attempt to provoke God into speech: "Behold, I cry out, 'Violence,' but I am God doesn’t answer me; I call aloud, but there is no justice" Job 17:7.

This goes on a long time …

“What is the Almighty that we should worship,” Job concludes?

What profit do we get if we pray to God?" (21:15)

Profit? Job must think God is, some cosmic vending machine.

In the face of this one of the friends calls him on this, and it's a zinger:

“Are you the first man that was born . . . Do you limit wisdom to yourself alone?" Job 15:7-8.

Well, Job then talks for 36 straight chapters – Really!! And in the course of that endless diatribe, Job's God is reduced to a silent kicking post; a convenient scapegoat that will just take it all.

That is what Job thinks, until the true and living God has enough of Job's self-indulgent anger and turns some anger back on him. These words are in the lectionary text set for today. Think of James Earl Jones speaking:

“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” Job 38:1-4a

So, Job, having gotten a cosmic dressing down, is stunned into silence.

Four chapters later he responds with these words: "I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee."

Let me make this clear for you, because they are among the dozen or so verses in the Bible that are the most poignant and important.

Before his catastrophe, when Job had only "heard of" God, God had been a mythological creature from Sunday School, an idea to kick around with Job's rich friends at the city gate, someone to blame for the weather, the economy,

a famine, a plague, the latest hurricane, or someone to thank publicly for one's prosperity.

Now, having provoked God to utterance, Job "sees" God, and is silenced by God's mere existence, by God's refusal to let Job's vending machine theology have the last word.

Job knows now that the God he had been taking to task from the ash heap was no God at all, but merely a “straw diety” if you will.

Until his tragic losses and his encounter with the living God, Job had been merely a pious kind of agnostic. Someone who says, "Well, there must be a God, look at this great big world." He’s a man who enjoys a theological debate as much as the next rich guy with time on his hands, but it’s just verbal jousting.

Now he has found the genuine article: *a deity that does not depend on Job's approval to exist*.

Job's whole notion of God as some sort of first cause of the universe has vanished, and in the wake of its demise something new is about to be born: something called *faith*.

Oliver Wendall Holmes is remembered to have said, "Faith begins when a man decides that he is not God."

Faith begins when it occurs to us that God might actually be real, and not just some silent passive power way out there that we use to back up our own ideology: pro life, pro choice, pacifism, creationism. Whatever.

Faith begins when we realize that God is bigger than any agenda we might have,

however righteous we feel about it.

"I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee. . . .

I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me which I did not know," says Job. (Job 42:3b).

The book of Acts tells us that once upon a time, the apostle, Paul, spoke to the educated Greeks of his day in the city of Athens. They loved nothing more than to talk theology and philosophy, just like Job and his friends.

Paul sized them up quickly as intellectuals who skated mostly on the surface of life.

To them he argued that God was not some idol, nor was God intellectually faddish.

They were like Job and Job’s friends at the opening of the book of Job – they have the money and leisure to spend their days sitting outside the best coffee shops in town, kicking around ideas about politics and religion. All morning long they play intellectual chess.

Rubbish, Paul seems to be saying. No, “In God we live and move and have our being."

Like fish who swim in the ocean, we live in a cosmos saturated in God. The medieval mystics understood this. It was in their bones.

But somewhere between the Renaissance and the 17th Century Enlightenment we, in the west, lost that idea.

Once God's existence became a subject of debate, as it did in the scientific age, it became easy to think of God as the silent clock-maker who wound up the cosmos and then crawled away never to be heard from again.

The existence of a life of the Spirit was lost. The creator and the creation were wrenched apart. and a spiritual blindness set in. The poets of the day saw this. The Romantics: Wordsworth and Coleridge, Blake and Keats knew this, and mourned it.

The debate over God’s existence is still going on. Convinced athiests like Richard Dawkins, the late Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris made hay because of the debate. Dawkins is still cashing in on it – he’s coming to town again in October.

These fellows took on the religious fundamentalists, which was really great, to an extent.

I loved Sam Harris's common sense answer to fundamentalists who say the world is only 6000 years old:

*Despite a full century of scientific insights attesting to the antiquity of life and the greater antiquity of the Earth [which is 4.6 billion years old], more than half the American population believes that the entire cosmos was created 6,000 years ago. This is, incidentally, about a thousand years after the Sumerians invented glue. . . This is embarrassing. (Newsweek* Nov. 13, 2006).

I agree. The God of the fundamentalists is too small, but so is Sam Harris's.

I see no reason at all that the fact of evolution and the existence of God are somehow mutually exclusive. And the burden is not on me to prove that. It rests with the fundamentalists and the athiests who are both so like Job's friends.

They each have their own agendas and both are completely lacking in the one thing you absolutely have to have to be a spiritual person -- wonder. Sheer wonder.

Consider the case of a young (about 35) man I met several years ago during a reception following a funeral at which I officiated. This fellow announced to me that he had gone to Sunday School at the church I was serving at the time. I mentioned playfully that we hadn't seen him around in a while, and he replied with a completely straight face: "Oh, I've outgrown it now."

Outgrown it? What had he outgrown? God? The idea that God was some heavenly Santa Claus? Great, if that is what he outgrew, great ! But to be satisfied, as he seemed to be, with having left such a concept behind with no inclination whatever to explore any further? That bothered me.

Job and his friends needed to be disabused of their puny idea about God and the worship of God being little more than a cosmic insurance policy.

And Job needed to be disabused of the idea that God was merely some sophisticated theological concept.

He needed to wake up. There are certain experiences in life that have the habit of doing that; experiences that get us in over our heads. Experiences like Job's experience of great loss.

Consider the short TED talk called, “My Stroke of Insight,” by Dr. Jill Taylor, a brain scientist -- a talk which has been viewed nearly 25 million times on YouTube.

Dr. Taylor had a stroke at the tender age of 37, and when her right arm went limp she realized what was happening and thought, "Wow, what an amazing thing for me, a brain scientist, to be having a stroke and to get to look at it happening from the inside. Yes, but I'm a busy woman. I think I'll just have this thing, for a couple of weeks, and then go back to work."

It was then and there she got in touch with the place she called *Nirvana* which was located in the right side of her brain. It came into full view for her for the first time in her life right then, when all the chatter from her left brain completely died away.

It was there and then that she realized she was more, so much more, than Jill Taylor, Neuro Anatomist. That she was one small part of all the billions of sentient beings that inhabit this planet; that her life before that stroke was a mere illusion of being separate. Life indeed was so much more than she had any idea.

One more example. Like a lot of kids who grew up in the 50s and 60s I was baseball crazy. I was a San Francisco Giants fan. Willie Mays was my main man.

But the New York Yankees was the world's greatest team. And though Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris were the great Yankee sluggers of my youth, there were two others who were truly the God's of baseball. Babe Ruth, of course, and Lou Gehrig, “the Iron man” – Iron because he played 2,130 consecutive games without a break.

I didn't know much about him except that he was stocky and had the most charismatic grin a man could have.

Yes, but I remember seeing a clip from an old newsreel from 1939 when he found out he had "Lou Gehrig's disease."

I remember seeing him standing there in Yankee Stadium speaking over the public address system. I remember that he had to speak a little haltingly because he had to wait for the words to echo through the huge park. It gave a certain weight to his address I'll never forget.

"Over the last couple of weeks you've heard about the bad break I got,” he said. Well . . . I consider myself . . . the luckiest man . . . on the face of the earth."

I didn't know what to make of that speech as a kid. I just knew it was something really big. That there was something more important than setting records like hitting 60 or more home runs in a season, and it had to do with the ability of a few, rare people to face down something bigger than themselves, like illness, or impending death.

But you know, you don't have to have a catastrophic illness or loss to meet God. Life passages like marriage, or the birth of a child can make that happen, too.

I have a friend, a young man I know who became uncharacteristically restless in his mid-thirties. One afternoon over lunch he confessed to me this restlessness. He also confessed to me the fact that his restlessness had disappeared with the birth of his first child. "I knew my life was missing something," he said. "I just didn't know what it was."

I believe that he had simply grown tired of being the center of his own universe. The birth of this baby boy was a demonstration to him of just that inner reality, like Jill Taylor’s stroke of insight.

The mystery of that brought him to church to look for more.

"Faith begins when a man or woman or whatever you are, decides they are not God." Not when they decide that believing in God is a rational position but when they realizes that the Universe is more awesome, more wondrous, than they ever imagined.

"Before I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee."

Amen