

**“When God Talks Smack”**  
**July 5, 2009**  
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Friends, if you believe that God is good, then say amen with me! (Amen!) Yes! We like to affirm the goodness of our God. Of course, people from all the God-centered faiths affirm God’s goodness with us. So, let’s get particular. Let’s try something from our United Church of Christ tradition—Friends, if you believe that God is still speaking, shout amen with me! (Amen!) Yes, our particular niche of the Christian faith directs us to listen for God’s voice not just in scripture, but in our lives as well. Ours is a God who is and was, and ever will be active in our lives and in the world.

We’ll do one more, and it is a tricky one, so listen carefully. If you believe that God can be a bully, say amen! (React) I can’t go there myself, despite what it seems to say in this morning’s scripture reading. When God shows up to talk to Job it seems like God is being a big bully, doesn’t it? God says: “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*...”<sup>1</sup> As greetings go, this is not so cordial. There’s no “hello, Job!” There’s no, “I am so sorry you have been enduring all this trouble, and I want you to know it *is* going to get better.” No trace of “you are my *beloved child* made in *my* image...” Instead, there is just a warning for Job to cover his *pelvis* because things are going to get rough. Then God illustrates the many ways in which Job cannot possibly comprehend God, who made the whole universe, while Job is just one small human being among many. In the depths of Job’s despair and long suffering, our good and loving God shows up and talks smack. *What* are we to make of this?

One traditional interpretation is to agree that God’s ways are beyond our knowing, so perhaps God is just pointing this out. That may be, but that doesn’t do much to answer the question of why God acts like a bully. I don’t know about you, but that just doesn’t make sense to me. God has always been my refuge from storms, not a loud and disturbing voice from inside a whirlwind talking smack. So, how do we square our experience of a God of love with this apparent bully in the Bible? Frankly, it is tempting to simply to skip the book of Job entirely and leave behind its troubling story. In my experience this is exactly what most Christians do.

But, we shouldn’t just skip it, because there are two important things to learn from the book of Job. First of all, it is a clear reminder that some of the ways the Biblical authors understood God are different from our own. Those authors understood absolutely everything to come from God’s hand, which means evil, too. In the book of Job, the character of Satan is an *agent* of God—fully

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<sup>1</sup> Job 38:2-3.

on the payroll—and one of several members of a heavenly court which presides over everyone's lives, so that every single nanosecond of each human life is micro-managed by God and company.

I don't think God works that way. It is clear to me that gifts and blessings come from God, and that the vast majority of human suffering comes from the actions of people, or random circumstances of life. When a relationship with a spouse or loved one breaks down, that's not God, that's *life* talking smack to us. When a loved one passes on unexpectedly, that's not God providing a test for us, that's *life* talking smack to us. When we lose a job, that's not God teaching us some obscure lesson, it is *life talking smack* to us. When God *seems* to be talking smack to us it is just the circumstances of our life we are hearing. God does not direct *anyone* into suffering. Not Job, not you, no one. We can disagree with the author of Job on this point.

Secondly, and more importantly, the book of Job demonstrates that when we call on God's name, God does show up. And this is something I can witness to in my own life. Because, when I was broken-hearted and far away from my children for the first time, I called out to God. When I felt alone; powerless; used up and scared—I called out to Jesus. Through the pain and struggle and all the smack talk of my life, I called out through the Holy Spirit, and *God showed up*. Just like God did with Job. Just like God will with any of us.

Our God wants us to call out in our times of need, celebration, sorrow and joy; to be forever in communicating with our Lord. For God has more to say to us than could fit in the Bible. Or even all of the sacred scriptures. God is still speaking to us, and inviting us to talk back, too. And it is important to know that God had more to say to Job than what we hear this morning, too. God kept speaking with Job through his eventual healing. God kept speaking to Job as everything he lost—and more—was returned to him. For God has promised good things to us. God has promised to bring us all into safe landings, even though our journeys are sometimes rough.

And that's the good news of the Hebrew Scriptures this morning: our God is someone we can call on in any circumstance. It is not God's will that we should suffer, even when our lives seem to lead us there. God wants us all to know grace and love. Indeed, God will be with us always: to call on in our struggles; to abide in during our healing; and as the only one who can guide us all into safe landings.

Amen?

**Job 38:1-11**

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: 2“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? 3Gird 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. 5Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? 6On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone 7when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? 8“Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?— 9when I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, 10and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, 11and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped’?