

Answers from the Ashes

"Who Are My People?
Where Do I Belong?"

Rev. Dr. Charlene Han Powell

June 27, 2021

Answers from the Ashes: Big Questions in the Book of Job

Who am I? Where do I belong? Questions like these emerge at different points in our lives, particularly in times of transition and uncertainty. As we begin to emerge from a challenging year of coping with pandemic realities, we may ask, Who is our God, and does God have any answers to our big questions?

Gather

Excerpts from Psalm 25

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.
Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.
Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and afflicted.

Relieve the troubles of my heart,
and bring me out of my distress.
Consider my affliction and my trouble,
and forgive all my sins.
O guard my life, and deliver me;
do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge
in you.
May integrity and uprightness preserve me,
for I wait for you.
Redeem Israel, O God,
out of all its troubles.

Listen, Converse, Imagine

Job 2:11-13, Job 6:8-27 (NRSV)

Now when Job's three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home—Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They met together to go and console and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. They sat with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.

⁸ "O that I might have my request,
and that God would grant my desire;
⁹ that it would please God to crush me,
that he would let loose his hand and cut me off!
¹⁰ This would be my consolation;
I would even exult in unrelenting pain;
for I have not denied the words of the Holy One.
¹¹ What is my strength, that I should wait?
And what is my end, that I should be patient?
¹² Is my strength the strength of stones,
or is my flesh bronze?
¹³ In truth I have no help in me,
and any resource is driven from me.

¹⁴ “Those who withhold kindness from a friend
forsake the fear of the Almighty.
¹⁵ My companions are treacherous like a torrent-bed,
like freshets that pass away,
¹⁶ that run dark with ice,
turbid with melting snow.
¹⁷ In time of heat they disappear;
when it is hot, they vanish from their place.
¹⁸ The caravans turn aside from their course;
they go up into the waste, and perish.
¹⁹ The caravans of Tema look,
the travelers of Sheba hope.
²⁰ They are disappointed because they were
confident;
they come there and are confounded.

²¹ Such you have now become to me;
you see my calamity, and are afraid.
²² Have I said, ‘Make me a gift’?
Or, ‘From your wealth offer a bribe for me’?
²³ Or, ‘Save me from an opponent’s hand’?
Or, ‘Ransom me from the hand of oppressors’?

²⁴ “Teach me, and I will be silent;
make me understand how I have gone wrong.
²⁵ How forceful are honest words!
But your reproof, what does it reprove?
²⁶ Do you think that you can reprove words,
as if the speech of the desperate were wind?
²⁷ You would even cast lots over the orphan,
and bargain over your friend.

1. Who are your people? How do you determine who your people are?
2. What does it mean to you to be a friend in need?
3. What does Job teach us about how God is calling us to be in community with one another?

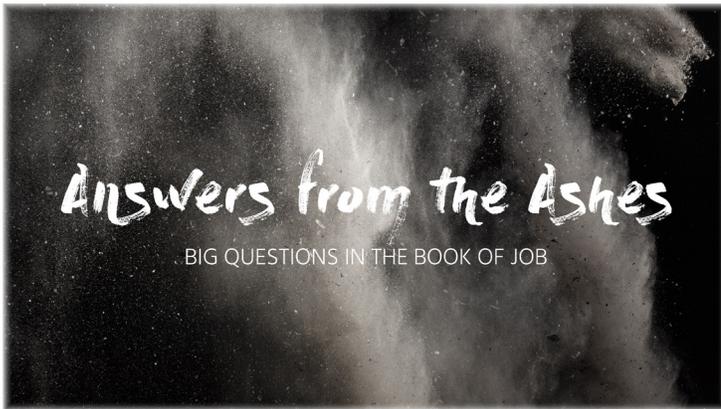
Respond

Reach out to a friend in need this week and sit with them in the midst of their grief/suffering/pain. Try not to offer any answers, solutions, or advice. Simply listen and be with them.

Dwell | Lectio Divina (Optional Practice)

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.



Answers from the Ashes

"Why is This Happening to Me?"

Michelle Vecchio-Lyzenga
Minister for Christian Formation

June 20, 2021

Answers from the Ashes: Big Questions in the Book of Job

Who am I? Where do I belong? Questions like these emerge at different points in our lives, particularly in times of transition and uncertainty. As we begin to emerge from a challenging year of coping with pandemic realities, we may ask, Who is our God, and does God have any answers to our big questions?

Gather

One: O God, for your love for us, warm and brooding, which has brought us to birth and opened our eyes to the wonder and beauty of creation,

All: We give you thanks.

One: For your love for us, wild and freeing, which has awakened us to the energy of creation,

All: We give you thanks.

One: For your love for us, compassionate and patient, which has carried us through our pain, wept beside us in our sin and waited with us in our confusion,

All: We give you thanks.

One: For your love for us, strong and challenging, which has called us to risk for you, asked for the best in us, and shows us how to serve.

All: We give you thanks. Amen.

(From Iona Abbey, A Simple Evening Liturgy)

Listen, Converse, Imagine

Job 29:1-20 (NRSV)

Job again took up his discourse and said:

² "O that I were as in the months of old,
as in the days when God watched over me;

³ when his lamp shone over my head,
and by his light I walked through darkness;

⁴ when I was in my prime,
when the friendship of God was upon my tent;

⁵ when the Almighty was still with me,
when my children were around me;

⁶ when my steps were washed with milk,
and the rock poured out for me streams of oil!

⁷ When I went out to the gate of the city,
when I took my seat in the square,

⁸ the young men saw me and withdrew,
and the aged rose up and stood;

⁹ the nobles refrained from talking,
and laid their hands on their mouths;

¹⁰ the voices of princes were hushed,
and their tongues stuck to the roof of their mouths.

¹¹ When the ear heard, it commended me,
and when the eye saw, it approved;

¹² because I delivered the poor who cried,
and the orphan who had no helper.

¹³ The blessing of the wretched came upon me,
and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy.

¹⁴ I put on righteousness, and it clothed me;
my justice was like a robe and a turban.

¹⁵ I was eyes to the blind,
and feet to the lame.

¹⁶ I was a father to the needy,
and I championed the cause of the stranger.

¹⁷ I broke the fangs of the unrighteous,
and made them drop their prey from their teeth.

¹⁸ Then I thought, 'I shall die in my nest,

and I shall multiply my days like the phoenix;
¹⁹ my roots spread out to the waters,
with the dew all night on my branches;
²⁰ my glory was fresh with me,
and my bow ever new in my hand.'

Job 30:9-23

⁹ "And now they mock me in song;
I am a byword to them.
¹⁰ They abhor me, they keep aloof from me;
they do not hesitate to spit at the sight of me.
¹¹ Because God has loosed my bowstring and
humbled me, they have cast off restraint in my
presence.
¹² On my right hand the rabble rise up;
they send me sprawling,
and build roads for my ruin.
¹³ They break up my path,
they promote my calamity;
no one restrains them.
¹⁴ As through a wide breach they come;
amid the crash they roll on.
¹⁵ Terrors are turned upon me;
my honor is pursued as by the wind,
and my prosperity has passed away like a cloud.
¹⁶ "And now my soul is poured out within me;
days of affliction have taken hold of me.
¹⁷ The night racks my bones,
and the pain that gnaws me takes no rest.

¹⁸ With violence he seizes my garment;
he grasps me by the collar of my tunic.
¹⁹ He has cast me into the mire,
and I have become like dust and ashes.
²⁰ I cry to you and you do not answer me;
I stand, and you merely look at me.
²¹ You have turned cruel to me;
with the might of your hand you persecute me.
²² You lift me up on the wind, you make me ride on it,
and you toss me about in the roar of the storm.
²³ I know that you will bring me to death,
and to the house appointed for all living.

Job 31:3-4, 35-37, 40

³ Does not calamity befall the unrighteous,
and disaster the workers of iniquity?
⁴ Does he not see my ways,
and number all my steps?
³⁵ O that I had one to hear me!
(Here is my signature! Let the Almighty answer me!)
O that I had the indictment written by my
adversary!
³⁶ Surely I would carry it on my shoulder;
I would bind it on me like a crown;
³⁷ I would give him an account of all my steps;
like a prince I would approach him.
⁴⁰ The words of Job are ended.

1. How does Job characterize his own behavior in "the months of old" (29:1-20)? What had Job expected his future would hold? How does Job describe others' treatment towards him now (30:9-23)?
2. Job longs for the way things were, when he felt God's presence and provision. When you are in a "storm" (29:22), how does looking back both help and hurt?
3. In the face of immeasurable, seemingly unjust loss, Job calls God to court (Job 31). When we experience great loss, is it okay to question God? Have you ever been told otherwise? Job 42:3-6
4. Job rails at God for multiple chapters before finally falling silent (31:40). In your own life and faith, have you experienced rhythms of speech and silence? How have those shaped your relationship with God? With pain?

Respond

God responds to Job's court order by instead taking him on a whirlwind tour of the cosmos and creation. There, God offers Job not answers but questions of God's own that, in their mystery, bring release and renewal.

This week, spend time in God's wild and wondrous creation, where we catch glimpses of God's character, extravagant and loving.

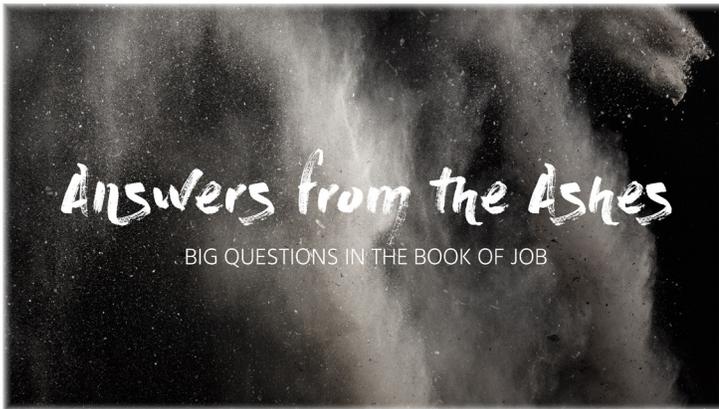
"The world is full of creatures that for some reason seem stranger to us than others, and libraries are full of books describing them — hagfish, platypuses, lizard-like pangolins four feet long with bright green lapped scales like umbrella-tree leaves on a bush hut roof, butterflies emerging from anthills, spiderlings wafting through the air clutching tiny silken balloons, horseshoe crabs ... the creator creates. Does he stoop, does he speak, does he save, succour, prevail? Maybe. But he creates; he creates everything and anything.

The creator goes off on one wild, specific tangent after another, or millions simultaneously, with an exuberance that would seem to be unwarranted, and with an abandoned energy sprung from unfathomable font. What is going on here? The point of the dragonfly's terrible lip, the giant water bug, birdsong, or the beautiful dazzle and flash of sunlighted minnows, is not that it all fits together like clockwork--for it doesn't, not even inside the goldfish bowl--but that it all flows so freely wild, like the creek, that it all surges in such a free, fringed tangle. Freedom is the world's water and weather, the world's nourishment freely given, its soil and sap: and the creator loves pizzazz." - Annie Dillard, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

Dwell | Lectio Divina (Optional Practice)

Job 42:3-6

Who is this who obscures design without knowledge?
Yes, I talked but did not understand,
of things too wondrous for me, that I did not know.
Listen now and I will speak;
I will ask and you tell me!
I had heard of you by hearsay, but now my eye has seen you.
Therefore I recant and change my mind concerning dust and ashes.



Answers from the Ashes

Who Is My God?

Rev. Dr. Charlene Han Powell

June 13, 2021

Answers from the Ashes: Big Questions in the Book of Job

Who am I? Where do I belong? Questions like these emerge at different points in our lives, particularly in times of transition and uncertainty. As we begin to emerge from a challenging year of coping with pandemic realities, we may ask, Who is our God, and does God have any answers to our big questions?

Gather

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.*

*O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.*

*For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.*

~ Saint Francis of Assisi

Listen, Converse, Imagine

Job 19:7–12, 23–27 (NRSV)

Even when I cry out, "Violence!" I am not answered;

I call aloud, but there is no justice.

He has walled up my way so that I cannot pass,

and he has set darkness upon my paths.

He has stripped my glory from me,

and taken the crown from my head.

He breaks me down on every side, and I am gone,

he has uprooted my hope like a tree.

He has kindled his wrath against me,

and counts me as his adversary.

His troops come on together;

they have thrown up siege-works against me,

and encamp around my tent.

'O that my words were written down!

O that they were inscribed in a book!

O that with an iron pen and with lead
they were engraved on a rock for ever!

For I know that my Redeemer lives,

and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;

and after my skin has been thus destroyed,

then in my flesh I shall see God,

whom I shall see on my side,

and my eyes shall behold, and not another.

My heart faints within me!

Job 38:1-18

The Lord Answers Job

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:
'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?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

Who determined its measurements—surely you know!

Or who stretched the line upon it?

On what were its bases sunk,

or who laid its cornerstone

when the morning stars sang together

and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

'Or who shut in the sea with doors

when it burst out from the womb?—

when I made the clouds its garment,

and thick darkness its swaddling band,

and prescribed bounds for it,

and set bars and doors,

and said, "Thus far shall you come, and no farther,

and here shall your proud waves be stopped"?

'Have you commanded the morning since your days began,

and caused the dawn to know its place,

so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth,

and the wicked be shaken out of it?

It is changed like clay under the seal,

and it is dyed like a garment.

Light is withheld from the wicked,

and their uplifted arm is broken.

'Have you entered into the springs of the sea,

or walked in the recesses of the deep?

Have the gates of death been revealed to you,

or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?

Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?

Declare, if you know all this.

1. What stands out to you about Job's prayer in Job 19? What is he insinuating about who God is?
2. What stands out to you about God's response in Job 38? What is God stating about who God is?
3. How does this holy exchange compare or contrast to your holy conversations with God?

Dwell | Lectio Divina (Optional Practice)

Psalm 143:1, 5–8

A Psalm of David

¹ Hear my prayer, O Lord;
give ear to my supplications in your faithfulness;
answer me in your righteousness.

⁵ I remember the days of old,
I think about all your deeds,
I meditate on the works of your hands.

⁶ I stretch out my hands to you;
my soul thirsts for you like a parched land. Selah

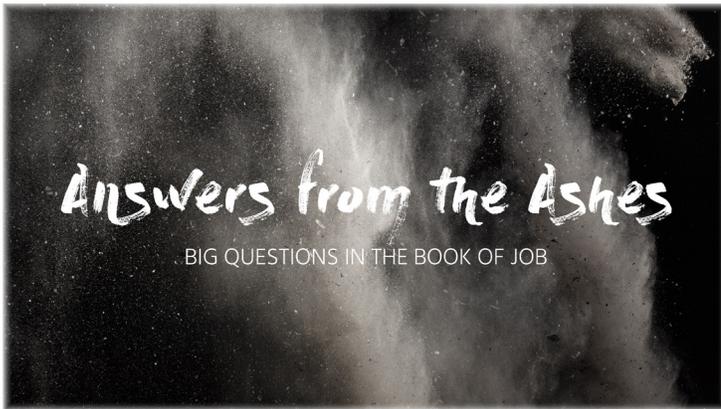
⁷ Answer me quickly, O Lord;
my spirit fails.

Do not hide your face from me,
or I shall be like those who go down to the Pit.

⁸ Let me hear of your steadfast love in the morning,
for in you I put my trust. Teach me the way I
should go, for to you I lift up my soul.

Respond

In your prayer time this week, spend some time LISTENING. What is God saying to you?



Answers from the Ashes

Who Am I?

Rev. Dr. Charlene Han Powell

June 6, 2021

Answers from the Ashes: Big Questions in the Book of Job

Who am I? Where do I belong? Questions like these emerge at different points in our lives, particularly in times of transition and uncertainty. As we begin to emerge from a challenging year of coping with pandemic realities, we may ask, Who is our God, and does God have any answers to our big questions?

Gather

Psalm 36:5-10

Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the clouds.

Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains,
your judgements are like the great deep;
you save humans and animals alike, O Lord.

How precious is your steadfast love, O God!

All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

They feast on the abundance of your house,
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.

For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light.

O continue your steadfast love to those who know you, and your salvation to the upright of heart!

Listen, Converse, Imagine

Job 1:1-12 (NRSV)

There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants; so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east. His sons used to go and hold feasts in one another's houses in turn; and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. And when the feast days had run their course, Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, "It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts." This is what Job always did.

One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. The Lord said to Satan, 'Where have you come from?' Satan answered the Lord, 'From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.' The Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job?

There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.' Then Satan answered the Lord, 'Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.' The Lord said to Satan, 'Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!' So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.

1. Answer this question in a few sentences: Who are you?
2. How would you describe Job?
3. What is challenging about this passage? What is hopeful about this passage?

Dwell | Lectio Divina (Optional Practice)

Use the gathering Psalm and dwell in God's practice using the practice of Lectio Divina.

Respond

As you go through your work, notice the ways you identify yourself or assign yourself value either positively or negatively.

Then at the end of the day, recite these questions and answers from *Belonging to God: A First Catechism* from the PCUSA.

Question 1. Who are you? I am a child of God.

Question 2. What does it mean to be a child of God? That I belong to God, who loves me.

Question 3. What makes you a child of God? Grace -- God's free gift of love that I do not deserve and cannot earn.