

Sermon: I Am the LORD, You Are Not

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Oct 20, 2024)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

NGC 6302, or commonly known as the Butterfly Nebula, is a dying star; some think it might be a dying binary star. Ordinary stars like our Sun live undistinguished lives, steadily churning out heat and light for billions of years. Oddly enough, their lives become infinitely more exciting when they reach the so-called 'retirement age'. As hydrogen fuel begins to run out, these dying stars expand to enormous sizes, becoming what are called 'red giants'. They then proceed to shed their outer layers into space, ejecting cosmic gas, dust, and ultraviolet radiation, thus producing beautiful shapes of planetary nebulae.

NGC 6302 is one such dying star. It lies within our Milky Way galaxy, roughly 3,800 light years away, in the constellation Scorpius. The image you see on the cover of this week's bulletin was captured by the Wide Field Camera 3 on board NASA's Hubble Space Telescope. I won't get into how scientists explain the formation of this nebula into what appears to be a giant butterfly according to human imagination. I don't know if I fully understand it myself, let alone trying to explain that to you.

But do take a moment to look at it now. I invite you to Google it at your leisure. Suffice to say, especially in high-resolution colour, it looks awe-inspiring. Its blue hue mixing with white light streaking across diagonally, is reminiscent of looking through a sapphire gemstone or a lapis lazuli. The cloud of cosmic gas gathering on the periphery seems to be paying homage to the centre, like an army of seraphim and cherubim bowing down before the throne of God.

Astronomers inform us that NGC 6302 has been shedding its outer layers for the past 2,200 years, and will continue to do so for thousands more years to come. Given its vast distance to us, and the time it takes for light to travel that expanse, NGC 6302 really had started dying some 6,000 years ago, the beginning of the known human civilization.

Which begs this question that I would like to pose to you: Where were you, when this Butterfly Nebula began its dying process? Where will you be, when it finally come to its glorious end? I know, I know, these are

ridiculous questions as none of us were born way back then, and none of us will be around when the end comes. But boys, could you imagine if we were?

In our Scripture readings today of Job 38, questions like those were repeatedly asked by the Lord God, to the poor Job who was simply trying to make sense of his unbearable and unjustifiable suffering. The good news is that God finally answers Job out of the whirlwind. The bad news is that you may not like what God has to say.

For the past two weeks we have been reflecting on the suffering of Job. We have seen Job pouring out his heart, shaking his fist toward heaven, proclaiming his innocence, defending his righteousness, his integrity, while challenging the pious orthodoxy mouthed off by his so-called three friends. Then God, elusive no more, speaks out of the whirlwind—the backdrop of whirlwind or tempest being a frequent accompaniment to diving appearances or theophanies.

However, instead of addressing Job's questions, Job's concern, God proceeds to ask a series of 60 or so questions of God's concern: "*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?*" (v.4) "*Have you commanded the morning since your days began?*" (v.12) "*Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades or loose the cords of Orion?*" (v.31) Make no mistake about it, these are not neutral questions, but rhetorical ones as God repeatedly mixes in sarcastic comments like "*tell me, if you have understanding*" or "*surely you know*".

Job gets no answers from God, but more questions. The barrage of questions for which Job has no answer comes rolling down like floodwaters, quickly submerging him in the larger order of God's creation. They are intimidating, unanswerable, leaving room for nothing but stunned silence from Job.

How are we to suppose to process such an exchange? What is God saying to Job, and by extension to us? Allow me to organize my thoughts into the following three theme:

First Job was **speaking words without knowledge**. The answer to God's pointed questions can only reveal a vast distance between God and humanity. For it is clear that God alone has the knowledge of all things and the power to shape all things. Job does not. He has neither the knowledge nor the power to sustain the world he lives in, let alone to shape it. Job may be righteous. He may hold a special place in God's heart, as God's servant, as was made clear on the opening chapter of the book. But that does not

mean the distance between the Creator and creature has been overcome. God is God, Job is simply a man. He has made his case before God, but his spoke without knowledge for his perspective has always been limited.

John Calvin, in his sermons on Job, said that God “mocks Job, inasmuch as he was rebellious, and it seemed to him that by arguments he could win his case.” For Calvin, the problem is that human beings are “so presumptuous as to glorify ourselves in our own imagination to have power and wisdom in ourselves.” We simply do not. The solution according to Calvin is simply acknowledging that God is God, and to stand in awe before the great God of glory. As an example to emulate, Calvin concludes each of his sermons on Job with this refrain: “Now we shall bow in humble reference before the face of our God.”

Second, this is **God’s world, not Job’s**, nor ours. The voice from the whirlwind attests to that simple fact. All our knowledge about life, universe and everything is derived from observation and deduction, not from eyewitness account. Just like Job, we were not there when the foundation of the earth was laid. We were not there when its measurements were determine, when its base sunk, its cornerstone laid. We were certainly not there, when the morning stars sang together, and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy. But we could choose to join in.

While preparing for this sermon, I came across a story about William Sloane Coffin, a noted American clergy, chaplain and peace activist. When he was an undergraduate student at Yale, three of his close friends were killed in an unfortunate car accident, their lives taken away so prematurely. During the funeral, Coffin was deeply disturbed by the words of the preacher, quoting from Job 1:21, “*the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord*”. He even considered tripping that preacher as he walked down the aisle. When he was about to do so, a small voice in his heart asked, “What part of the phrase, Coffin, are you objecting to?” He thought it was the second part: “The Lord has taken away.” “Then suddenly it dawned on me that I was protesting the first: ‘The Lord gave.’ It hit me hard that *it was not my world*; that at best we were all guests. And ‘The Lord gave’ was a statement against which all the spears of human pride have to be hurled and shattered.”

This leads to my final point, **God cares**. It’s been thirty plus years since the Hubble Space Telescope was first placed in the orbit around the earth. All that time, it continues to dazzle us with extravagant pictures and data, bearing witness to the vastness, the beauty of God’s creation, God’s

cosmos. Multiple galaxies have been discovered and uncovered. The Butterfly Nebula is but one out of billions of stars that our naked eyes could potentially enjoy.

In light of such overwhelming realities, a crucial question must be asked. "Who are we?" We wonder with psalmist, in putting this question to God, "*What are humans that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?*" (Psalm 8:4)

In the context of the near-infinite scope of creation, the voice of the Lord is over mighty waters; the voice of the Lord is powerful and majestic; the voice of the Lord thunders from the whirlwind, comes to address one of us, to Job. Yes God speaks about the vastness of creation, with knowledge and power that we could not fully comprehend. Yet God speaks, to Job. In so speaking, God shows that God cares for the creature. God is not dismissing Job, God is reorienting him, away from the deep mire of his own suffering, into a larger awareness of God's good creation.

In the Book of Job, Behemoth is a mythical land creature so powerful that could only be overcome by God. Leviathan is a mythical sea creature so chaotic that could only be tamed by God. An illustration by William Blake, the English poet and painter, portrays God reaching down from heaven to Behemoth and Leviathan, as if they are pets, awaiting and delighting in God's caress. As part of God's address to Job, in chapter 40, verse 15, God says, "*Look at Behemoth, which I made just as I made you.*"

"Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" The answer is Job, yet, he is also the one with whom the living God speaks to. Yes, God cares.

In the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**