

"Out of the Whirlwind"

A meditation for Art Show Sunday based on Job 38:1-7, 34-41 and Mark 10:35-45

October 18, 2009

Redlands United Church of Christ

Sharon R. Graff

* * * * *

"You can observe a lot just by watching." So said Yogi Berra, baseball hall of famer whose ebullient personality and trademark aphorisms make him a favorite of fans and sportswriters alike. Much as I hate to admit it about a lifelong East Coast player, Yogi Berra is right... "We can observe a lot just by watching!"

Look around! Here, in vibrant color and vivid texture and diverse shapes, we can see revealed the lesson of today's scripture readings, and it is this: Chaos + God = Creativity! Listen to the stories of these artists. Ask them how a particular piece was formed. And, more often than not, the story will reveal a moment of chaos... What colors to use? How to mix the mediums? Will this process work with these textures? Oops, how do I cover up that mistake? Chaos is an artist's companionable friend. However, we can observe a lot more than chaos when we watch these artists at work! Look and see how this chaos is also touched by an element of the Divine—it comes in the form of a spark of a new idea, or a nudge to move in a different direction, or an insight not yet put on paper—and Voila!...there you have it!...a new and unique piece of art created out of the whirlwinds of chaos and spoken into reality by the voice of God. Chaos + God = Creativity. This formula surrounds us with delight this weekend, as we move from booth to booth, from artist to artist, from soul to soul. Chaos + God = Creativity! Such a formula is not only evident this weekend...it can provide us hope in times of great adversity. We are not the first to discover God's good work in the midst of chaos. Far from it.

This is an old lesson deriving from an ancient folktale of the familiar and oft-quoted story of Job—that man undeservedly praised for his patience. It is not about Job's supposed patience that I wish to speak this morning. That's old news. Rather, I invite us to turn our attention to the four words heard this morning in the story of Job: "Then God answered Job *out of the whirlwind...*" (emphasis mine).

Finally, after dozens of chapters of silence, finally from out of the whirlwind, God speaks. We hear in God's words the Bible's supreme attempt to deal with one of life's most perplexing problems. Why is there evil in the world? Why do good people suffer? How can a just and loving and righteous God allow such ill to predominate? For 37 long chapters, Job has been addressing these questions. He and his friends have tried to puzzle out the relationship between suffering and God and justice, and Job himself has demanded that God resolve the conundrum. We observe Job's suffering upon losing his family, his home, his livelihood, and his health; we see him whining and crying out to God for answers; then debating with his three so-called "friends" about how a good God could allow such unjust suffering; and finally, resigning himself to silent seething... That is, until God speaks from out of the whirlwind that has become Job's life, from out of the whirlwind of that incessant chatter that keeps him awake at night, it is God who finally speaks.

What has this to do with creativity, you may ask? Generations of commentary authors have remarked on the surprising discontinuity between what Job asks and what God answers. Job has been asking how his suffering can be justified, and God answers by taking him on a guided tour of Creation. Put into our setting this weekend, imagine all the patients at Redlands Community Hospital, along with all the staff and doctors and nurses who work long hours for decreasing benefits...line them all up...listen to their questions about suffering—theirs and the suffering of others...and then, without comment, lead them in the bunny hop through Covenant Hall and into the garden. Then walk away, satisfied that their painfully raw questions have

been duly answered. You can observe a lot just by watching, God, in effect, says to Suffering Job.

Yes in the face of Job's open wounds and raging doubts, God takes him on a whirlwind tour of creation. God asks Job about mysterious and hidden details of the workings of the cosmos, from the widest ranges of astronomical and meteorological movements, to the biological cycles of the shyest wild animals. Some of God's questions to Job have a satirical cast, highlighting Job's (and our) ignorance: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know!"

But many of the questions sound less like interrogation, and more like wondering, almost rapturous, delighting in the intricacies of the created order and the mind that can know it: "Who has put wisdom in the inward parts," God asks, "or given understanding to the mind? Who has the wisdom to number the clouds?"

Here, God's questions serve a two-fold purpose. In the first place, observing the beauty of nature teaches Job that his sufferings are part of a wider and broader context. Less gently stated, this whirlwind tour of creation puts Job in his place. Job has been asking how his suffering can fit into the pattern of God's justice; and God responds to Job's questions by revealing that these are the wrong questions to ask. This may seem like cold comfort, the biblical equivalent of the movie observation that personal problems "don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world," little better than telling Job to "deal with it and move on."

But this glimpse of the intricate beauty of nature has a second effect as well. In this guided tour of Creation, God is, in effect, letting Job see the world, at least in some small way, as God sees it. God is making it possible for Job—and for us—to transcend our ordinary human perspective and to share, to the extent it is humanly possible, in "the wisdom to number the clouds," the wisdom that belongs to God. And by speaking to Job out of the whirlwind of the

chaos of Job's sufferings and by offering to Job a perspective of the whirling dervishes of creation itself, God is inviting Job—and inviting us—to become conscious and intentional co-creators with God in our own small portion of this world.

Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once wrote, "Each creative act is the universe incarnating itself as one." Seen from this perspective, God's speech from the whirlwind does not dismiss or disqualify Job's suffering by placing it in a larger world-context where it does not matter. Rather, from out of the whirlwind, God reveals to Job the working of divine creativity that can also work in him—in Job if he will only work with it, and in us if we will allow the same—to take him and us beyond suffering to some new realization of the good. God puts Job in his place, to be sure, and, as Job observes a lot just by watching, he sees that place as a place of boundless creativity.

From out of the whirlwind...out of the chaos...out of the mess that is sometimes our lives, God speaks: Chaos + God = Creativity!

So it is also in our gospel reading for the morning. From out of the whirlwind of jealousy and positioning for power, Jesus speaks, asking a simple question, "What do you want of me?" Two of his closest friends reply, "we want power...we want to sit within the camera's angle, right at your side, Jesus...we want to be seen and heard and known for our importance." The other disciples erupt in a perfect storm of resentment, and out of the whirlwind created by his closest followers, Jesus chuckles.

Calling them the hotheads, the Sons of Thunder, the tumultuous brothers, the ones who bring confusion, chaos, disorder and even anger in their wake—Jesus takes on James and John with loving intent. They ask of him an outrageous favor. And Jesus uses their naiveté to teach about new creative relationships within a new divine community. Chaos + God = Creativity...even in human relationships! As one commentary author writes, Jesus responds to their chaos with his creative teaching called the Great Reversal: in this world, Jesus says, the

rulers and the great ones are those who lord it over others and are tyrants; but among those under God's reign, "whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." The values and power-relations that characterize this epoch are to be overturned, creatively replaced with values of service and relationships of mutuality.

So we see this weekend. As Paul Hodson intimated to the local newspapers that quoted him, the set-up of this particular show takes a lot of people working side by side. In the several years I've been observing, sometimes our work on Art Show weekend can look a bit chaotic. Nerves can become as frayed as the cart of tangled electric cords needed to light up artists' booths. Food trays are carried in all directions all at once and Friday night guests can seem like ants moving on a thousand different paths. Yet out of this chaos, touched as it is by the Spirit and Love of our Creator God, out of this whirlwind of activity, comes breath-taking and life-giving creativity.

Yes, our facilities and gardens are overflowing with creativity. It is a creativity born out of chaos... As the artist's original "plan" for a particular piece goes askew, and they have the good sense to go with the flow, often something even more spectacular emerges from that so-called chaos. So it is for the rest of us as well, according to today's passages. Out of the whirlwinds of our various life situations, God speaks. Out of the whirlwinds of relationships, God moves. Out of the whirlwinds of our past, God offers a new and hopeful path for our future. Discouraged? Angry? Upset? Disillusioned? Confused? Get out of yourself, for just a moment, and look at the world through God's eyes. You can see a lot...and see it a lot differently...just by watching!

Amen and Blessed Be!