

Behold the Hippopotamus

Job 40:15-24

Rev. Dr. Benjamin J. Broadbent
The Community Church of Sebastopol, United Church of Christ
25th Sunday after Pentecost – November 6, 2016

I.

Some of you may be aware that we are in an election season. For those of you who are not yet old enough to vote, you may have noticed that the adults in your lives are a little stressed out as this Tuesday approaches. Parents and grandparents who rightly limit the “screen time” of the children in their lives because it’s “not good for you,” might want to heed their own rules. Nevertheless, I would like to congratulate all of you for being here. It seems to me to be an extremely sane thing to do to gather in a screen-free place such as this sanctuary to practice a Sabbath from partisan politics, to hear a word of hope, and to gather with others at the table of reconciliation hosted by the Prince of Peace.

Because our political season is so divisive, so unpredictable, and yet so scripted, I would like to deviate from the prescribed lectionary readings. I would like to address our electoral anxiety by talking about something that has absolutely nothing to do with politics, at least from a human point of view. On this first Sunday in November, and the 25th Sunday after Pentecost, I would like to talk about... the hippopotamus.

Unless you looked at the sermon title ahead of time, you probably didn’t see that coming. And even if you read your Bible from cover to cover, you may have missed any and all references to hippopotamuses. The truth is that there is an anonymous hippopotamus in the Book of Job. There is it called “Behemoth” and several biblical scholars who know something about zoology and zoologists who know something about the Bible think that “Behemoth” likely refers to... the hippopotamus.

II.

To understand why the Bible is interested with the hippo, we need to know something about the Book of Job and about the man whose name is Job, spelled like the word “j-o-b” but pronounced “Jobe.” Job lived a long time ago.

The Bible calls him "righteous" which means he did what was right; he was fair and loving and generous.

Job had everything he needed to make himself happy; he had a home and enough money and a family and others respected him.

But then he lost it all, and I mean *all* of it.

He lost his home, his wealth, his children, and his health.

He was left with nothing, well, *almost* nothing.

He was still alive, and he still had his thoughts and his feelings and his questions.

Oh, and he had a few friends who came to visit him.

I imagine it was probably hard to visit Job at that point in his life.

It's not easy to spend time with someone who has lost everything.

He was poor, so he was very thin and he wasn't clean.

He was sad, so sad, because his beloved children had all died.

And he was in pain because he had a disease that caused sores to open up all over his body.

So you can see why his friends might not have enjoyed spending too much time with their old friend Job.

But they came anyway, which is saying something.

They came and they looked at him and they tried to help him figure out why all of this bad stuff happened to him.

"You must have done something wrong, Job? That's why God is punishing you," they said.

"No, try again," Job said, because he knew he had done nothing wrong.

"You must not have trusted in God enough," they said.

"That can't be it," said Job, because he had always loved and trusted God.

"Maybe you should just try to make the most of it," his friends said.

"Make the most of it?" said Job, "Look at me, I'm one breath away from death."

Eventually his friends left because they couldn't figure it all out and he wasn't much fun to be with anyway.

And Job was alone because he couldn't find a conversation partner adequate to his poverty and his grief and his pain.

III.

Then something different, something new happened: a whirlwind showed up.

Yeah, a whirlwind, like a little tornado.

And out of the whirlwind came a voice and the voice was the voice of God, creator of the heavens and the earth and of every living creature.

And when God started talking Job immediately realized that God was nothing like his friends.

His friends at least tried to cheer him up, tried to help him get his head around why things had gone so badly for him.

God didn't do any of that.

You see, God wasn't very good at being an active listener, wasn't schooled in using non-accusatory "I" statements.

God would have failed Clinical Pastoral Education, let alone basic parenting.

Instead of saying, like a trained therapist, "Tell me more," God said, "Let me tell you something. Let me tell you about my hippopotamus."

The Bible puts it like this: "Behold Behemoth!"

Huh? What does Behemoth, a hippopotamus, have to do with anything?

Job must have been thinking that, and so are we.

But that's what God said and the Bible expects us to take notice.

"Behold the hippopotamus," God says. "This giant plant-eater is my creation. I am the one who created this marvelous animal with all of its remarkable qualities; I am the one who made this beast. Behold! Open your eyes and see!"

(Okay.)

Then God says, "My great hippo is strong and powerful. Look at his thighs! Check out how big he is, all held together with awesome and powerful muscles. His body is huge, but it works so well!"

(That's nice.)

God continues his poem about the hippo: "He doesn't just have a tail, it's an amazing tail that sways like a cedar tree in the wind."

(Uh huh.)

"His bones are tubes of bronze," God continues, "his limbs like rods of iron."

"What architecture!" God sings, "what beauty in my hippo's ability to meet and adapt to the challenges of life and growth, while never weakening."

(It seems like God really loves the hippo, doesn't it?)

"He ranks first among my works," God says. "Not that you people are unimportant, but my hippo ranks first. Only I, the Maker of this beast, can destroy it, so put away your sword, your arrow, your gun."

God keeps going: "The hills bring the hippo his food, and all the wild animals play nearby. I am pleased to see my hippo in his natural habitat, where it lives in harmony with the other creatures - plants and animals, where it leaves the river over two-rut rails (one rut for the right feet and one for the left) to graze like an ox on the nearby grass."

"Under the lotus plants she lies, hidden among the reeds in the marsh. When the river rages, she is not alarmed; she is secure. The wetlands, while not well suited for people, work nicely for my hippo, who is fully at home in this lush and watery world. Giant as she is, she can hide in the green leaves or under the surface of the water. Settled in the mud, even great currents do not sweep her away."

(I did not know that. Anything else?)

One more thing, God says, "Can anyone capture the hippo by the eyes, or trap it and pierce its nose? This creature of mine is not your pet. It is not something you can put on a leash and parade around town. It is my creature and it praises me, its Creator, by being what I have created it to be. The hippo brings me honor by doing what I have made hippos to do."

(Ah.)

IV.

And just like that Job has found a suitable conversation partner in God. You see, by the end of the story, Job's thinking needs a dose of Behemoth. In other words, his hippo-campus needs hippo-potamus because Job needs to know that he is not the center of the universe. Job hasn't done anything wrong - his rightness or righteousness is not in question. He is a morally upright, virtuous person who acts in good conscience. But his rightness cannot save, his virtue cannot satisfy, his conscience cannot adequately explain why life has turned out the way it has.

And so, the whirlwind.

God's mode of engaging Job is of a totally different order than any of his friends. As God says in Isaiah, 5 books after Job: "Your ways are not my ways, and your thoughts are not my thoughts."

God is not beholden to the agitating agendas of well-meaning friends.

God is not flummoxed within the frame of our dire derelictions.

God is not anxious about our noxious and noisome needs.

Buckle up now: God is not captive to the partisan political pageantry that pervades so much of our public purview.

And in the end, if you can bear three more p's, God covets only our praise and never our pretense nor our pandering.

In a different place and at a different time, but maybe not so different from our own, Jesus is pressured to choose.

"Are you voting for the emperor or are you not?" they asked him in Luke 20.

"Show me who you're talking about," Jesus said, and someone gave him a coin that had a picture of the emperor on it.

Imagine Jesus holding that little dime in one hand and a hippopotamus in the other.

Can you see it?

Then can you hear what he said next?

"Give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor. Give to God what belongs to God."

Amen.