

“Answerizing and Whataboutery”

Job 19:23-27a; Luke 20:27-38

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Some years ago, I watched the award-winning documentary *The Fog of War*, in which former secretary of defense Robert McNamara talks about his life, especially the Vietnam War. At one point McNamara says this:

Never answer the question that is asked; always answer the question that you want asked. That is an important rule that I learned to follow, and I still follow it to this day.

McNamara reminds me of what author David James Duncan calls “answerizing,” which he says grows out of the conviction that the only right way to handle any question is to offer *The One Correct Answer*.

For example, in the first several chapters of Job, Job's three well-meaning friends come to him to try to explain what has happened. Job's friends were experts at answerizing. They could not accept or tolerate the inexplicable complexity and mystery of Job's suffering and were sure there must obviously be One Correct Answer to his predicament. Job refuses their answers by insisting that his suffering remains a mystery.

If you read on in the story, you know that God sides with Job. And by the end of the story, you will know that there is no real answer for Job. Before the One True God, Job realizes that all of life is beyond answerizing--and we cannot explain suffering any more than we can explain God.

This reminds me of Browning Ware, long-time pastor of the First Baptist Church in Austin, Texas, who was accomplished in the ministry of *listening*. Some years ago before he died Browning wrote the following:

When younger, I thought there was an answer to every problem. And for a time, I knew many of the answers.

I knew about parenting until I had children.

I knew about divorce until I got one.

I knew about suicide until three of my closest friends took their lives in the same year.

I knew about the death of a child until my child died.¹

Jesus, of course, was frequently the target of those who were looking for *the one correct answer*.

For instance, in today's Gospel reading it is the Sadducees, with a *Gotcha ploy* that, ironically enough, turned on a belief they rejected; the resurrection of the dead (cf. Mark 12:18, Acts 23:8). No matter. Any turf will do when the goal is to destroy the opponent.

You see, the Sadducees came out of the priestly cast in ancient Israel, and over time gained control over the rituals in the Jerusalem temple, a position which also made them power brokers in affairs of state. When the temple was destroyed in 70 A.D., they disappeared without a trace.

But this was their game. They asked Jesus about the hypothetical widow of a man with seven brothers. When he dies, she marries a brother. When *he* dies, she marries another brother, and so on, one after another. *Whose wife will she be in the resurrection?*

That clincher question was asked with a deliberate *slowing of the words*, each one *poison-tipped*. It was spoken with eyes narrowed, arms folded in an accusatory pose and an unmistakable sneer across the face. Gotcha is not a game; *it's a weapon*.

Jesus answered evenly, speaking important truth about the earthbound nature of marriage which will give way to the greater life promised to the children of the *resurrection* (that beautiful phrase, lost on those with no ears to hear). He added testimony from Moses, who in the presence of the burning bush confessed the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, *the God of the living*, "to whom all of them are *alive*" (v. 38). That is who God is, Jesus says, the God in whom and for whom *death* has lost its sting forever.²

God is the God of the *living*.

¹ Kyle Childress, *Answerizing*, The Christian Century, November 1, 2010

² F. Dean Lueking, *The Gotcha Game*, The Christian Century, October 28th, 1998

Which brings us back to Job.

It is heartbreaking to consider Job's anguish, the obscurity, the utter annihilation that faces him. Suddenly childless, penniless, bereft even of his wife's love, he could well wonder if the universe is impersonal. *Yet* he does not ask to be *remembered*. He cries out instead for his **praise** to survive.

Faced with the end of *personhood*, all of us turn into Job. We may approach religious life as if it were about us, our survival of this world, our way into heaven, our souls in eternity. At the end our loved ones are consumers on our behalf, investing in *final* memorabilia, pulling together boards of photographs, sports trophies, old service uniforms, needlepoint and even that horrible lamp given as a joke at Christmas.

But Job doesn't cling to such things. Instead he places himself in the hands of a *redeemer*. Such a person is able to *buy back* what another person, usually a family member, has lost. It is a role for someone who above all is willing to *listen*.

Job, you see, has the temerity to imply that his Redeemer is the Almighty God, the maker of heaven and earth. This breathtaking confidence, faith or effrontery is what redeems Job and makes him so much more than just a figure of pity. He becomes, on the spot, a three-dimensional person.

When the poet *John Keats* lay dying, he thought that nothing of him would survive. Little of his poetry had been published; at 25 he was being cheated of the opportunity to do more. He asked that his epitaph be: *Here lies one whose name was writ in water*. This epitaph was engraved on a stone that survives in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome, and even though his name does not appear on it, he is widely known.

Another man, once just as obscure, has his name written on hearts and minds everywhere. *He is known as a Redeemer*. On a more personal level he is known for how he *listens* to us—how at needful times he invites us to tell our stories and even to ramble.³

³ Lawrence Wood, *Sunday, November 10th*, The Christian Century, October 29th, 2013

You know, throughout history, *human suffering* has been so severe that St. Teresa of Ávila cried to God, “*No wonder your friends are so few, considering how you treat them.*” The age-old question is “*Why does God allow suffering?*” The age-old answer is that we are called not to escape reality through an illusory existence, but to endure suffering as participation in the salvation of the world.

Michael Battle, Provost and Canon theologian, in the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles said a number of years ago:

*“The church (has) often support(ed) oppressive political and military regimes, thus turning **Christ’s suffering** into a destructive reality, **a civil religion** supportive only of the rich and powerful. Of course, in the end this is **not** God, but an **idol** used to rally the masses to war. As Christians, we must correct the delusions about God’s image. As Job states, “After my skin has been thus destroyed . . . I shall see God.” In other words, our suffering strips away the false gods and false selves who make claims on being the living God. We are then led to union with God. We should not create suffering, nor should we impose it on others. But we participate in the suffering of the world in such a way as to end others’ suffering.”⁴*

Friends, remember, that (according to Jesus), *God is the God of the living*. Hence, Jesus seems to suggest that *all* will be resurrected. Faith in Jesus’ victory over death—on our behalf—and our eternal destiny to live “*to him*” does *not* demobilize us but **empowers** and **emboldens** us as agents of *liberation here and now*.

⁴ Michael Battle, *Wildfire*, The Christian Century, October 17, 2001