

June 14 2020

Job 29: 21 – 25; 30:29; 39: 13 – 18

Romans 12: 1 – 13

Now at the very beginning, let's accept that the Book of Job is a STORY. And while the story of Job goes in a lot of directions and can have a lot of meanings and interpretations, it's a STORY. Most of us grew up being taught that Job was the victim of a wager that God made with Satan. Satan says, "I'll bet I can get your servant Job to denounce you," and God says, "Nope, not a chance. Do your worst because Job will always be my faithful servant." For obvious reasons, allowing Job's possessions to be destroyed, his children to be killed, and his health to be ruined in order to prove loyalty to God doesn't set well with us. We don't want a god who goes around making bets with Satan.

But suppose, just suppose we were wrong about Job.

Suppose Job isn't the symbol of unfair suffering, the name we use when someone we know is experiencing a lot of trouble—"Oh, she has the patience of Job," "He suffered just like Job."

Because these verses that I read from Job 29 and 30 offer a slightly different perspective on Job, a less sympathetic view of the man, although granted, losing one's family and possessions and health is sad no matter how unlikeable a person is. These verses don't explain Job's suffering, but they illustrate how Job enjoyed privilege and felt...well, *entitled*. He had a pretty high opinion of himself. "When I took my seat in the square...the voices of the princes were hushed. I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy, I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy and I championed the cause of the stranger. They waited for me as for the rain...I sat as a chief, and I lived like a king among his troops, like one who comforts mourners." Wow.

And, as Job goes on to describe himself, he mentions that he was admired by young and old, everyone listened and marveled at Job's wisdom, he enjoyed popularity and influence unlike other person on earth.

And then, in an instant, all of it was gone. The family, the fortune, the fame, the accolades. Job was no longer the man of the hour, “I go about in sunless gloom, I stand up in the assembly and cry for help. I am a brother of jackals and a companion of ostriches.” Poor Job. If that’s the company he began keeping, it meant Job was brother to a predator and a scavenger, the jackal. It meant that his only friend was a large, flightless bird, the ostrich, that is not attractive or especially useful.

Let’s talk about ostriches for a moment. An ostrich is about 6 to 9 feet tall, and can weigh as much as 350 pounds. They don’t fly but they can run up to 40 mph. Ostrich eggs can weigh 150 lbs. They have these weird looking clawed feet, spindly legs and big thighs. Their feathered body is like a big, feathered blob out of which rises a long neck on top of which sets a tiny head. The eyes on that tiny head, though are two inches in diameter, the largest eyes of any land vertebrae, about the size of a billiard ball. While ostrich feathers may be valued and ostrich meat enjoyed by gourmets, most people don’t cozy up to the ostrich. They look ridiculous, foolish, not a bird you would aspire to be if you could be any bird in the world. The emu—made famous in the Liberty Insurance commercials—is cuter, and much more appealing as far as gangly, flightless birds go.

Still...God created the ostrich, even as God created Job. God created the jackal, even as God created Job. Perhaps Job has become too wonderful in his own eyes, too enamored with his own reflection. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder but if the beholder is the Lord God Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth, then everything—even ostriches—is beautiful. It is as if Job as stuck his head in the sand, refusing to see anything good or beautiful or godly in the midst of HIS suffering.

Sticking one’s head in the sand is something we associate with ostriches, which has come to mean refusing to face the truth about something. In fact, many people in this day and time have stuck their heads in the sand when it comes to white privilege or systemic racism, or the ever-growing gap between the wealthy and the poor, the educated and the uneducated. They refuse to face the truth about it. But the ostrich—about whom the expression “sticking one’s head in the sand like an ostrich” was created—actually doesn’t stick its head in the sand. The

origin of that myth comes from Pliny the Elder, a Roman naturalist and philosopher who lived between 23 and 79 AD. Pliny recorded that ostriches thrust their heads in the sand, believing that they were hidden from predators. In truth, ostriches stick their large beaks in the sand to dig a nest for their young or to find food. They aren't refusing to face reality or think they are hidden when they are in plain sight.

So, it's not surprising that in the 38<sup>th</sup> chapter of Job, after everyone has given their opinion pro and con about Job and his suffering, that the Lord weighed in. The Lord weighed in specifically on Job's self-admiration and his pity party. Seeing that Job had stuck his head in the sand, the Lord said, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Who determined its measurements—surely you know!" (A little divine sarcasm here.)

The Lord then begins to name the parts of creation: the day and night, the moon and stars, the ocean and rivers, the rain and sun. Finally the Lord names the different creatures living in that creation—never claiming all these creatures are perfect, but that all these creatures are good. About the ostrich, the Lord said, "for it leaves its eggs to the earth and lets them be warmed on the ground, forgetting that a foot may crush them, and that a wild animal may trample them. It deals cruelly with its young, as if they were not its own; though its labor should be in vain, yet it has no fear; because God has made it forget wisdom, and given it no share in understanding. When it spreads its plumes aloft, it laughs at the horse and its rider."

Debbie Blue writes, "The ostrich is foolish, forgetful, lacking in wisdom, overly proud of its wings that can't fly. But God doesn't condemn the ostrich for its behavior. God loves all God's crazy animals. [Like the ostrich laughs at the horse and its rider] so the ostrich laughs at us. Maybe it is just the sort of companion we need."

Perhaps the ostrich exists so we won't take ourselves so seriously. We do take ourselves *SO SERIOUSLY*. We make a typo on a document and we act like it's the end of the world. We forget someone's birthday and we are ashamed to look that person in the eyes. We commit a sin and decide it's unforgiveable. We say something inappropriate or rude and

we wring our hands. We show up improperly dressed and we die of embarrassment. We make a wrong decision—for ourselves or for a family member or for a friend—and it's all over. What have we done? Like Job, we view ourselves as picture perfect, sinless, immovable, all wise. We are not amused.

But in chapter 38, when God takes the focus off of Job and Job's tragedy, it might not be God being unkind or inconsiderate. Maybe it was more of a graceful move—a great gift. Maybe, quoting Debbie Blue, “God is saying, “Look, stop focusing on yourself, look around for a minute—look at it all. It's all so beautiful and mysterious and complex—and bigger than you, way bigger than you. Consider the birds, man. Stop being so consumed with yourself, so anthropocentric.” Maybe it is not meant to diminish us in a scornful way, but rather to diminish us in a way that sets us free. God is trying to give us a break—consider what is NOT you, what is BEYOND you. Stop posting your every move on Facebook—go outside for heaven's sake.”

We think of the ostrich as unattractive, as clumsy, as useless, but the ostrich has been around a lot longer than we have. Maybe it's time for us to pull our heads out of the sand and take a good look at the world around us—the animals and the plants and the mountains and the sky and the birds and the people.

If we pull our heads out of the sand, what we'll see is God's grace, in abundance, all around us, in every part of creation, even in a creature as ridiculous as an ostrich. The animals and the plants and the mountains and the rain and the sky and the birds and all the people are clothed in God's grace. The ostrich, unattractive and not especially useful, is a delight to God and encourages us not to take ourselves so seriously. But instead, take God's grace seriously, living life just like the Apostle Paul wrote,

<sup>3</sup> Because of the grace that God gave me, I can say to each one of you: don't think of yourself more highly than you ought to think. Instead, be reasonable since God has measured out a portion of faith to each one of you. <sup>4</sup> We have many parts in one body, but the parts don't all have the same function. <sup>5</sup> In the same way, though there are many of us, we are one body in Christ, and individually we belong to each other. <sup>6</sup> We have

different gifts that are consistent with God's grace that has been given to us. If your gift is prophecy, you should prophesy in proportion to your faith. <sup>7</sup> If your gift is service, devote yourself to serving. If your gift is teaching, devote yourself to teaching. <sup>8</sup> If your gift is encouragement, devote yourself to encouraging. The one giving should do it with no strings attached. The leader should lead with passion. The one showing mercy should be cheerful.

<sup>9</sup> Love should be shown without pretending. Hate evil, and hold on to what is good. <sup>10</sup> Love each other like the members of your family. Be the best at showing honor to each other. <sup>11</sup> Don't hesitate to be enthusiastic—be on fire in the Spirit as you serve the Lord! <sup>12</sup> Be happy in your hope, stand your ground when you're in trouble, and devote yourselves to prayer. <sup>13</sup> Contribute to the needs of God's people, and welcome strangers into your home.

Let's live like ostriches—our heads out of the sand, not taking ourselves too seriously, wrapping our lives in God's grace.