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Proper 14 • Job 38:4–18 • August 10, 2014

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Homiletical Helps on LSB Series A—First Lesson

Proper 14 • Job 38:4–18 • August 10, 2014

This text emphasizes the transcendence of God. The question for the preacher is, “Why do we need to know that God is transcendent? How does God’s transcendence function in our theology and our lives?”

In the context of Job, God’s transcendence serves to undermine any claim we may have on God. We like to think that God treats us fairly, but consider what happens to Job. Job is “blameless and upright” (Job 1:1), yet he suffers wave after wave of calamity. His friends assume that this suffering is due to some sin that Job has failed to confess. But Job protests that he is innocent and does not deserve this suffering. This elicits a stinging rebuke from the young Elihu. It is inconceivable that God should act unjustly (Job 34:12).

Our text comes immediately after Elihu’s speech, but the Lord is responding to Job, not Elihu. The Lord does not actually claim that he is acting justly. Indeed, the reader knows that Job’s suffering is due to a bet between God and Satan and that Job’s suffering is not a punishment for sin. Rather, the Lord emphasizes that Job is in no position to talk back to God.

In keeping with the flow of the book of Job, the preacher should replace the listener’s sense of indignation with a sense of wonder at God’s majesty and his grace. (Grace isn’t fair either, after all!) In our text, this is accomplished by a recitation of God’s awe-inspiring acts of creation. This can be developed in a number of ways. First, there are a number of such recitations in the literature of the early church. Gregory of Nazianzus, for example, goes on for pages about how God’s creation exceeds our understanding. He says,

Consider the tribes of birds, and their varieties of form and color, both of those which are voiceless and of songbirds. What is the reason of their melody, and from whom came it? Who gave to the grasshoppers the lutes in their breasts, and the songs and chirruping on the branches, when they are moved by the sun to make their midday music, and sing among the groves, and escort the wayfarer with their voices?¹

Gregory’s ultimate point is that if we cannot even understand creation, how can we understand God? Second, the preacher could draw on contemporary science to the same effect. For example, there are YouTube videos that seek to give a sense of the scale of the universe.² These are quite effective at evoking a sense of wonder.

Once the wonder is evoked, where should it lead? The theme of wonder at God’s transcendence interfaces with the other readings for the day, and these connections provide possible routes for the sermon to travel. The psalm appointed for the day (Ps 18:1–9) appeals to God’s power as the basis for praying that God rescue him from death. The epistle reading, on the other hand, stresses that we do not need to ascend to heaven to

bring Christ down because the word is near us (Rom 10:5–17). Here God’s transcendence functions as law because it means we are powerless to reach him. This dilemma is answered by the word of faith that we proclaim. The gospel reading (Mt 14:22–33) has Jesus’s miraculous power functioning first to terrify the disciples when they think he is a ghost and then to comfort them when he announces, “Take heart, it is I.”

No matter which course the preacher settles upon, he should give thought to how he will evoke the wonder he intends. To paraphrase C. S. Lewis, “Don’t tell us God’s creation is wonderful; describe it so that we say it is wonderful.”³

David R. Maxwell

Endnotes

¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, “The Second Theological Oration—On God,” *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 152.

² For example, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uaGEjrADGPA>.

³ This is an adaptation of a point Lewis makes in a letter to Joan Lancaster in June of 1956. To see the entire letter, go to <http://www.lettersofnote.com/2012/04/c-s-lewis-on-writing.html>.
<http://scholar.csl.edu/cj/vol40/iss3/7>