

*Elihu: Job's Unexpected Prophet**

Job 32:1-22, 37:1, 10-24

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This afternoon's Scripture reading is from the thirty-second and thirty-seventh chapters of Job, a rather obscure part of the book, so a brief synopsis of Job is probably in order. Remember: God and the adversary, Satan, are having an argument about whether the righteous fear God for any reason other than because it suits them. Satan bets that if Job loses his wealth, health, and family, he will curse God; God says, go ahead; let's see what happens. So overnight, Job loses everything. His three friends arrive to condole and debate with him for thirty chapters about why this has happened, the dialogue breaks down, and then, out of the blue, in chapter thirty-two, a young man named Elihu enters the conversation and gives his opinion for five chapters. But he doesn't get a chance to hear what Job and his friends think because God interrupts him and confronts Job out of the whirlwind. Job repents, God chastises the three friends and restores Job's fortunes, but Elihu disappears as suddenly as he came. No one acknowledges his speech, and we never hear from him again.

Job is not the cheeriest of books, but you can't do the Wisdom genre without it, and I think you can't do youth ministry without it. It isn't just that every adolescent I know is fascinated with the problem of suffering in Job. It's that every adolescent I know *who won't go to youth group* is using this book as a defense weapon. All those kids who stay on the fringes of the church, but who ask the church's questions; all those counter-culture rebels and street-wise operators and science junkies who wouldn't be caught dead at a lock-in but might talk theology with you for a few hours—Job is their book. It is their best defense against the church and us, and they know it, because it is a lot easier for us to blow these kids off, to rationalize their absence by saying, "Oh, you know, they're going through that rebellion thing," than to hang in there with God and Satan and Job and his friends and a teenager who has the energy to debate all night.

The book of Job has a reputation for being deep and agonizing and fearless about pressing the most painful questions of the human condition; it's considered a book for mature adults. It doesn't carry an "X" rating, like the Song of Songs; it isn't completely and embarrassingly absent from the liturgy and the pulpit, but it's definitely rated "R": adult situations; satanic plots; inscrutable deity; inane friends; total despair; viewer discretion is advised. Of course they love it. And that's hardly surprising when you remember that wisdom literature has always had a teaching component. It was written by sages, and those sages had students.

I want to push that thought. What if the book of Job was actually composed with a youth audience in mind? This doesn't appear to have occurred to many of the commentary writers; perhaps they think a junior high classroom might diminish Job's dignity. The most brilliant and pious minds the world has ever produced have wrestled with the issues raised in Job; lives have been dedicated to its study. But if the book

**This sermon was preached at the Princeton Theological Seminary Forums on Youth Ministry, St. Simons Island, Georgia, January 11, 1999.*

teaches us anything, it teaches us that the problem of suffering cannot ever be solved, even by the most venerable among us; it is a dilemma for life. So: what if the book of Job was written for students? What might we see differently, if we imagined ourselves reading over the shoulders of young people?

When I asked myself that question, the first thing that leaped out at me was Elihu. Elihu is the star of this morning's text, a young Buzite from the land of Buz, and you know your youth group is going to have fun with that: yes, he's mad as a hornet, but you would be too, if you'd had to sit through seven days of silence and thirty chapters worth of dialogue between Job and his friends before it was your turn to speak. If this isn't a classic adolescent scenario, I don't know what is: sitting around, listening to adults talk; listening to them hold forth about life; listening, sometimes, to opinions that are blatantly wrong, but not invited to give your own, because this is adult conversation, and it would be disrespectful to interrupt. So much of adolescence is about not interrupting, and holding it in. Elihu held it in for thirty chapters, while Job's friends talked about how Job should just accept the Deuteronomic tradition that you get what you deserve and Job talked about how he hadn't done anything to deserve this and they could take their Deuteronomic tradition and get out because God wasn't fair, God was just big and powerful; and after thirty chapters, Elihu couldn't take it anymore. Listen to how he begins his speech:

I am young in years, and you are aged;
Therefore I was timid and afraid to declare my opinion to you.
I said, 'Let days speak, and many years teach wisdom.'
But truly it is the spirit in a mortal,
the breath of the Almighty that makes for understanding.
It is not the old that are wise, nor the aged that understand what is right.
Therefore I say, 'Listen to me; let me also declare my opinion.'

It's important to note that while Job's three friends ground their authority to speak in tradition and the wisdom of experience, Elihu doesn't claim that kind of authority. He can't; he's too young. Instead, he says his authority to speak comes directly from God, because like the prophets, he is inspired. Like the prophets, he's only a vessel with a message that he can't keep bottled up. You would think he'd get a little respect with a prophetic claim like that, but as every marginal person knows, it is always a tricky thing to claim one's voice at the table of power. Just because *you* believe God has inspired you doesn't mean others will believe it, too. And if you are an outsider, a young person claiming inspiration, you can bet you're going to meet with a lot of resistance from those who have no intention of sharing their power to speak.

Would you like to know how some of the commentaries describe Elihu? "Hot-headed," "bombastic," "simplistic." Others see him as an intruder or brazen interrupter. Some feel his words add little to the book.

Somehow, I think Elihu's youth is involved, here. He interrupted an adult conversation. People don't like that, not in any culture. Many of the scholars I read think Elihu's speeches could easily be eliminated from the book without loss, because they either repeat some arguments or anticipate others. Apparently, they don't add anything new; Elihu's *age* doesn't add anything new. But think: what if this book was written with students in mind? What if Elihu's age *is* important? What if he is a very

deliberate invention of some sage in ancient Israel, who is trying to make a point that can only be made by a *young* character, a character whose youth is in total dissonance with a culture that values age and experience and tradition? If we read the text with students' eyes, what do we see?

I think the first thing we see is that Elihu is completely recognizable. Too often, this is how adults interact with adolescents; this is how the *church* interacts with adolescents. We don't grant them the power to speak. We either ignore them—notice how Job and his friends don't even respond to Elihu's speech, after thirty chapters of their own debate—or we patronize them—notice how many commentators use words like “bombastic,” “hotheaded,” “simplistic.” Many scholars have decided that Elihu is just not worth their time, because he doesn't say anything that Job hasn't already said or that God will say. And *that* should grab our attention. Because if Elihu's words are God's words, then somehow, *Elihu speaks truth*. He isn't “simplistic”; *he is right*. Listen to what he says:

Chapter 33, verse 12: God is greater than any mortal.

Chapter 34, verse 12: The Almighty will not pervert justice.

Chapter 35, verses 7 and 8: If we are righteous, what do we give to God? Our wickedness and righteousness affect other human beings.

Chapter 36, verse 29: Can anyone understand the spreading of the clouds?

Chapter 36, verse 26: Surely God is great and we do not know God.

It is always galling to be shown up by a youth. When you value tradition, and wisdom, and age and experience, how infuriating to spend days debating the most critical issues of faith with your closest and wisest colleagues, and to end in a stalemate, despite all your best rhetoric. And then, when there's nothing left to say, because this is obviously partisan and no one is ever going to change anyone's mind, to have some kid, some intern, with no experience, no training, no authority to speak, *to have some kid come up with an answer!* Not the whole answer, but (you have to admit) a pretty good one—for a kid. And then, if that isn't humiliating enough, *to have the kid know he's right*, and to go on and on about it: “If you have anything to say, answer me; if not, listen to me; be silent, and I will teach you wisdom.” Well: maybe you can credit him with one good idea, but you can't let it go to his head, or else you'll never keep control. So you pat him on the head. You chuckle at the passion and awkwardness of youth; you tell him he'll have a lot to offer one day, as soon as he lets go of all that idealism and learns how to think and speak rationally. *You make him the fool*. And that's how you can live with the humiliation of having a kid be more righteous than you.

I can't even count how many times I've seen this happen. There was the sixteen-year-old youth elder in my congregation, who couldn't believe that we were actually considering a one million dollar improvement to the sanctuary for air conditioning when there were hungry children in our neighborhood, and come on—air conditioning in Minnesota? There was the ninth grade boy at the boarding school where we lived, absolutely brilliant with zero social skills, who told my husband, the chaplain, that even if he was an annoying jerk of a kid, even if nobody liked him, including his dorm parents, he should still be able to take a shower in his own dorm without the other boys picking on him. There was the senior boy at the same school, an artist, a musician, a leader among his peers, who stood up to the headmaster and said that the senior

football players who had hazed a freshman dorm during Spirit Week ought to be benched for the Homecoming Game, because no matter what the headmaster said, hazing wasn't just about jocks having a little fun and letting off steam; it was wrong.

None of these students won the debate. None of them spoke particularly well. Some of them were downright irritating. But they were all right. And because they were right, it made the church and the school feel better to cast them as the fool: hotheaded, bombastic, idealistic, simplistic. It was easier to laugh at them than to admit that they spoke truth, to critique their rhetoric than to struggle with the ethics of these situations. If you can blame everything on raging adolescent hormones, then you don't have to deal with the possibility that maybe these youth are more than fools. Maybe they are prophets—however unexpected and unwelcome.

Now, it would be a mistake to canonize Elihu after his years of neglect, as if we could make up for the silencing of every young person by placing this one on a pedestal. It would also be a mistake to make him the central figure in what is, after all, Job's story, and Job's agonizing search for a new way to speak about God. There are things Elihu says about the redemptive discipline of suffering that I would want to challenge; there are places in the text where he is so mad at Job that he comes close to sounding like a fundamentalist. But where some scholars see a stylistically awkward, textually intrusive, later addition to an otherwise perfect poem, I see a young man finding his voice in the church. Elihu is a lot like Job: outspoken, sure of himself, arrogant, but genuinely groping for truth, utterly determined to stay in this conversation. Elihu does not have the perspective of Job's wretched experience, but he needs to be a witness, and to bear his own witness. He needs to be part of this very adult conversation. Even if he has to interrupt to do it.

I take courage from the fact that the ancient sages decided that the young prophet Elihu deserved to stay in the book of Job. Their decision has great importance for us. Maybe our young people will be like their students, of long ago. Maybe they will be inspired by Job's integrity, and Elihu's boldness. Maybe they will see that there are limits to human wisdom and tradition, especially when it comes to explaining suffering. Maybe they will compare Elihu's speech to the words of God, and find that no one, not even the best prophet, can ever speak for the Almighty. No one, not even the wisest sage, can ever ask all the right questions. And it has nothing to do with age, or education, or life experience, or faith. There are simply things that are too wonderful for us, things that we cannot ever understand.

The scholar Kathleen O'Connor has said that when all the talk is done, and Job and his friends have nothing more to say, what is left is simply silence, and a space for being addressed by God. What is left is a place for encountering the One who will wait for more than thirty chapters for us to wear ourselves out, so that we can see what has been there all along: God, with us and loving us and calling us to a new place. We do not know everything, but we do know something, and that is that we are never abandoned and we are never silenced and we all get a turn to speak—even if we have to interrupt. Thanks be to God for the unexpected.