Sermon (10/18/09, Job 38: 1-7, 34-41):

What if the heavens opened and the sound of God’s voice suddenly resounded in response to the yell of a person who had just used Jesus’ name as an explicative after hitting his finger with a hammer? What would God say?

What if God spoke in all too clear intonations in response to the fretful cry of a person weighing whether he should refuse or capitulate to a suspicious request his boss has just made of him? What would God say?

What if God tapped on the shoulder a person who has just purchased a mega-millions lottery ticket and, as she’s putting it in her purse, prays… ‘God, if you just let me win this…I promise I will give most of it to the church.’ What would God say?

What if God refused to keep God’s tongue silent in response to a person walking into a crowded market with explosives secretly strapped to his chest chanting praises to God as his hand tensely holds a detonator? What would God say?

What if God’s voice echoed across a crowded campaign rally where a Presidential candidate has just declared America to be God’s chosen nation? What would God say?

What if God spoke up in response to a person who has just verbally abused a person with AIDs declaring that it’s God’s punishment for her abominable lifestyle? What would God say?

In the movie ‘O God’, John Denver, while in his bathroom shaving, asked God what miracles he’s recently done. Much to his surprise, God answers: ‘What about the Mets in 1969 when they won the World Series? That was a pretty good one.’ God says as his image appears in the mirror which, incidentally, bore a striking resemblance to George Burns.

The truth is that most of the stories we have in the Bible describe a pretty terrifying ordeal when God actually shows up.

When Moses went to investigate a burning bush, a voice boomed from the bush demanding Moses to remove his shoes for he was standing on Holy Ground. Moses’ serene and satisfied life of being a Shepherd was suddenly and irrevocably turned upside down.

On his way to Damascus to cleanse the town of its Christian influences, when Paul was confronted in the desert by Jesus…a mighty storm whipped up out of nowhere. Paul was consequently knocked off his horse and left in the sand completely blind.

When the Apostles’ gathered in the upper room after Jesus’ ascension, praying for the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit came, making quite an impressive entrance - a violent wind shook the house, flames appeared over the heads of each Apostle, and the Apostles began to chatter in languages they had never even heard before. How’s that for a close encounters of the God kind?!

Perhaps, all this reminds us of the old adage, “Be careful what you pray for because you just might get it.”

With more words than we care to count, Job has been knocking on heaven’s door demanding an audience with God. Today, Job gets his wish. Out of nowhere, God shows up. No that’s putting it too mildly. Out of a whirlwind, a wind storm to rival the one that picked up Dorothy’s house in the Wizard of Oz, God’s voice booms and shakes the very soul of Job.
“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” God thunders. I don’t know about Job but I think I would have passed out right then and there.

“Gird up your loins like a man!” God demands.

“Just kidding, God!” My trembling voice would have probably said. “I’ll be quiet now…you can home. Please go home!”

“I will question you now, and you will answer me!” God announces.

“No, Alex, please…I don’t want any of those categories!”

There’s no getting off the hook! Job’s been looking for God and now God has responded in unequivocal terms. Be careful what you pray for, as they say.

Some have said that this portion of Job highlights some of the most beautiful poetry in the Bible. Even so, God doesn’t come close to answering Job’s why’s. God doesn’t even disclose the heavenly battle that’s been going on between God and the Adversary.

What God does do, however, is lift the conversation that has been going on between Job and the Comforters to a whole new plane. Indeed, while Job and the Comforters were on opposite ends of a heated debate, the truth is that they were pretty much operating within the same framework. The Comforters’ case was that Job must have done something wrong to merit this kind of punishment. Job’s response was that he had been a righteous man and that this verdict had been wrongly executed. God doesn’t even touch that debate. Instead, God pushes Job and, eventually, the Comforters to move beyond the narrow limits of their tiny world. God pushes them to consider that their God is too small and their reasoning of the holy is way too simplistic. God pushes them to realize that we mortals have significant limits. God is bigger than our best thinking, God is greater than our most complex thought, God is more mysterious than our best estimation.

‘Gird up your loins, Job!’ God demands. ‘There is a force at work in this world that is wild, uncontrollable, mysterious, glorious, untamable, uncontainable…powerful beyond your wildest imaginings!’

If God were to actually respond to some of those questions I posed at the beginning of this message, my guess is that God would mostly push us in a similar way. My guess is that God would force us into that most uncomfortable place of realizing that our god, like Job’s god, is way too small.

This past week, there was a suspenseful and exciting moment when a NASA probe was about to intentionally collide with the surface of the moon. The plan was that the first stage of the probe would hit the moon with such force that a plume of debris would explode into the air. The second stage of the probe would then fly into that cloud of debris and send back to earth as much data about that debris as it possibly could before it too met its demise on the moon’s surface.

Well, the plume from the initial explosion turned out to be barely noticeable, at least to the naked eye, but, evidently, the mission was a huge success. A hefty stream of data was sent back to the earth which is now being analyzed. Maybe many amazing and new discoveries will be made from that information but whatever is learned it will all be derivative knowledge. God,
on the other hand, is the author of all our derivative knowledge. God is the one who creates out of nothing…as the book of Genesis mentions. God is the Creator and we are the created who, at best, can observe, learn from, and mimic God’s techniques.

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” God asks Job. “Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, so that a flood of waters may cover you?”

A fundamental part of our Reformed Theology is the belief that God is first and foremost…Sovereign – above and beyond all limits of our mortality, above and beyond our every effort to contain and control God, above and beyond our best thinking and surest conclusions…God is Sovereign – God does what God wills and understands to be best.

As part of this, mystery is a must. God is mysterious and beyond our ability to fully comprehend, at least on this side of paradise. Mystery is a sure and certain component of belief.

These are important tenets of our reformed heritage and it saves us from claiming too much about God. Indeed, be wary of those who do claim too much about God often making God sound small and easy to figure out.

Once in a while I will see a bumper sticker that says something like…“God said it. I believe it.” I wouldn’t necessarily disagree with that statement. My problem is that, often times, figuring out exactly what it is that God is saying is one tall order. Indeed, the more I learn, the more questions and mystery I tend to find.

As we might not at first realize, I don’t think this is as much a terror filled confrontation with God as we might be led to think. Indeed, it seems to me that threaded through this entire conversation is evidence of God’s deep love for Job. Maybe this conversation is a bit like the conversation Jesus had with the rich young ruler, where, even though Jesus’ response to him was pointed and quite challenging, the whole conversation was framed by the statement that ‘Jesus looked at him and loved him.”

“Gird up your loins like a man…” is the first thing God declares to Job. Perhaps this isn’t as much about an invitation to a fight as it is an invitation to discovery. The origins of this phrase implies the need for someone to tuck in their tunic or robe so that they might be able to run and move unhindered similar, maybe, to the idea of rolling up one’s sleeves. Perhaps, God is inviting Job to prepare himself for a wild, challenging and, ultimately, freeing journey that will broaden his heavenly horizons and deepen his relationship with this sovereign, unpredictable God Job has been looking for. In essence, perhaps, it is a divine invitation for Job to come and see; come and experience a deeper understanding of who God really is and what God’s kingdom is really about! Maybe it’s the same kind of invitation that God makes to us as well.

God’s address to Job is also personal. Clearly, God has listened to all of Job’s words leading up to this moment. Clearly, God hasn’t been ignoring Job as Job had thought. Indeed, God’s words suggest that God has been pretty intricately involved in Job’s life every step of the way even when Job was convinced that God was gone. The truth is that God loves Job so much that God refuses to allow his beloved Job to remain in the puny, confined, and ultimately deadly world of his mortal making. Instead, God fiercely dismantles Job’s small god so that Job might
come to know the real God who breaches all mortal boundaries…even boundaries like tombs thought to be eternally shut and sealed by heavy stones.

So let us gird up our loins so that the King of Glory might enter in! And all God’s people said, Amen!
General Prayer:

Loving God, we admit that our god is too small. We work so hard at trying to figure you out, to analyze and restrict you, to contain you and tame you, to hold you and control you, to know you on our terms rather than yours. We work so hard and, in so doing, we often miss completely the opportunity of knowing you as you really are.

Forgive us, O Lord and slow our pace when we try to run from you terrified that you might ask us to change in ways we don’t want changed. Forgive us, O Lord, and keep us in your presence even when our assumptions about you are being painfully dismantled.

Bless this small place, O Lord, filled with searchers and believers, doubters and resisters, those who are still holding on and those who are near letting go. Bless this small place, O Lord, and speak to us even when we might be a little scared of what will happen when you do.

We ask this as we hold before you these special prayers. Be near to those who are hurting and who are weary. Give peace to those who are stressed and stretched. Give healing to those who are wounded and ill. Give hope to those who are discouraged and afraid. We ask you to bless the work of the Sunshine School – its teachers, its Director, its volunteers, its leaders, its students and their parents. We ask you to also hear these prayers and concerns that we now name either out loud or in the silence of our hearts…

Finally, gracious God, who is never too far away to hear us even as we pray together saying…

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.