

OUT OF THE WHIRLWIND
JOB 38: 1-7 (34-41)

October 18, 2009
University Church of Chicago
Eugene H. Winkler, Pastor

Hello? That you, Arthur? Yeah, me. Your kid brother, Ken. Where am I? Gee, I don't really know...in a hotel room in Chicago. Why? Well, everybody has to be someplace, as the old song goes, ya know?

Drunk? No, not drunk, Arthur. But I've had too much to drink, if that's what you're asking. I know, I know. When I start hittin' the bottle, I start calling people. And somehow I almost always end up calling you. Right? And now you're angry again, 'cause I'm calling you in the middle of the night. But, Arthur, this time it's different. Hold on, hold on. Listen to me. I'm not just calling to let you know that I'm depressed and drunk and a failure. I've played that game with you too many times. Too many times.

Do you say a prayer of confession in your church? Or are all those snooty people in your church like you, Arthur: thinking they don't have anything to confess before God or anybody else? Do you every take the words of the prayers seriously? I do. Oh, boy, do I. I have a great sense of sin, Arthur, but you, you only have a sense of guilt. I live with both sin and guilt. You feel guilty about your golf score or the fact that you cheat when you play. Or you feel guilty that some of your clients may be unhappy with you, but you don't ever think you've done anything wrong, really wrong, do you?

OK, Arthur, I will give you the bottom line of this conversation. This monologue. Yes, I know, that's what it is. You are always wanting to cut to the chase, get to the bottom line--the most important words in your vocabulary. So here it is: the reason I'm calling you is to tell you that I plan to shoot myself. Oh, within the next hour or so.

No. This is not a joke. This is serious business. Never anything more serious in all my life. The reason I'm calling you is to make two requests--no, make that three. First, forgive me for all the ways I have hurt you over these forty-four years of my life. I really wanted you to be my friend, and I've been trying all my life to get your attention.

It's hard for me to have friends. We don't trust other men, men don't. Because we're always competing with them. I envy the trust women have in each other and the depth of the friendships they can develop. I have painfully discovered that most people love you conditionally, that is, they will love you only if you behave, only if you measure up to their expectations, on the condition that you not embarrass them. And, Arthur, let me tell you something: that ain't love.

I've been reading the Book of Job lately. I am struggling with that part where God answers Job's questions by questioning him: "Where were," God declares, "when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding." I don't understand a lot of things, Art, but one thing I do understand is love.

Only five people have loved me with no strings attached: Sara, our three sons, and my pastor, Jake Barnes. And those people have taught me the meaning of grace.

Oh, yeah, second request. Watch over Sara and the boys for awhile, will you? All my financial affairs are in good order. They will be quite well off, so you won't have to write any checks out of your precious accounts. You won't have to dip into your mountainous savings or sell any stock. Yes, Arthur, I'm serious with this threat. This, old buddy, is the bottom line, which is exactly the thing you always so impatiently seek.

And the third request. Arthur, when you come to the church and the cemetery, please don't say "funeralwise." For once in your life, try to act like a caring human being. Goodbye, Arthur.

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Hi, Sara. Yes, I'm OK. Well, sort of. I know, I know. Honey, don't cry. I have some things to tell you. Where? Oh, in a hotel room in Chicago. Well, I finished my meetings and checked into this hotel, and I've been sitting here for several hours, thinking and staring out the window and wondering what it all means, and...

Do you realize that we've been married almost twenty-two years? It will be, would have been, on June 14th. Nobody would have thought that we would, that I would turn out like this. I took out our wedding pictures the other night and looked at them. You were asleep and the boys were watching the Bulls and the Nets in the playoffs.

Anyway, I looked at those pictures and I thought what a handsome couple we were in 1976, fresh out of college, all ripe for the world, so much in love. You were so young and beautiful. And I looked at you sleeping there in our bed, and I thought, she hasn't changed much at all, but, my God, I have...

What? No, I'm not coming home tonight. No, that's why I called. Sara, I didn't want to leave you a note or anything like that, so I'm calling you to tell you that...well, this is it. I can't take it any more. Honey, you're smart. You know what I'm trying to say. Do I have to spell it out for you? I know this seems cruel, to tell you this over the phone, but there's no easy way. I'm going to end your misery and mine. Tonight. In this clean, nice hotel room in Chicago. I have hurt so many people and I've hurt myself and I cannot understand myself and my motives. I simply cannot go on like this! Just too many regrets, too many disappointments.

Babe, don't try to talk me out of this. This is not another call to plead for sympathy or understanding, 'cause, Lord knows you've given more than enough of both of those over the past twenty-three years. Neither is this an impulsive decision, although we both know how my impulsiveness has gotten me into trouble again and again. I really do think this is best, for your sake and the boys', for my sake--that I put an end to this worthless life.

I've been planning this for a long time, Sara, so if you will look in the top right hand drawer of my desk, you will find an envelope containing all the possible instructions and information that you will need--at least everything I have tried to consider during the past six months.

Yes, I know, honey. Yes, I know. But, believe me, it's for the best. I was telling Arthur a few minutes ago about reading the Book of Job and trying to understand all the terrible things that happened to him. Yet he kept his faith even when his friends thought he was crazy, deluded. Sometimes even your friends become your enemies--especially when they try to give you advice and tell you how much smarter they are than you. In the 23rd Psalm, that part about God spreading a table before me "in the presence of mine enemies." My enemies rage within me, Sara. If God would spread a table in the presence of my enemies, it would be a feast of the devil.

I have one more phone call to make, to Jake. Not just because he's our pastor, but because he's tried to be much more than a

counselor through all my trials and tribulations. He's tried to be my friend, and I have shut him out of my life in so many ways. I just want to talk to him. Please, Sara, please understand. I'll see you in the morning. Goodbye, my love.

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Hello, Marilyn. Is Jake there? Yes, I would like to talk to him, if I may. I know it's late and I know you two have so little time together and I know it's a Friday night, but I would like to talk to your husband for just a few minutes. Thanks.

Jake, thanks. It's good to hear your voice, too. I've been thinking a lot about our conversations, about the last talk we had, about all the times you've listened to me--particularly during the past six months. And, Jake, I just don't see any hope. I just can't take it any more. The depression, the drinking, the self-destructive behavior. I've simply hurt too many people. I'm ashamed of the person I have become. But you know all that. How many times have we talked about these feelings?

Thanks for saying that, Jake. I can't tell you what that means, what you mean to me. But--what? Promises? Well, sure, I know about promises. Jake, don't do this to me. Yes, I know, at baptism, at marriage, when I joined the church, when my sons were baptized...Come on, Jake, you're not playing fair.

God's promises? Well, sure I know. Yes, I know about Easter. I'm in church almost every Sunday. Yes, I know. Don't play games with my mind, Jake. That God won't leave me, that He will walk with me through the valley of the shadow of death. I know. Not just words. What did you say? That means that God will go to hell with me, that I can make my bed in hell...I remember that psalm, too. That's what that phrase we don't usually say in the Apostles' Creed means, "He descended into hell."

Jake, the promises have been my problem. The promises I have made and broken over and over again. That's why I'm sitting in this room. Broken promises, so many of them, to many expectations I haven't lived up to--that's a big part of my guilt. But I had not really thought about God's promises. That's a big promise: that God will go to hell with me.

Give me a minute here. To tell you the truth, I wish I hadn't called you. I had everything worked out, to end it all. And now you're making me reconsider my whole life. As well as my death.

You're saying that God has promised never to leave me, that God knows what I'm going through and that God will find a way to lead me through this terrible darkness. Jake, excuse me, but I've heard all this before. Just more theological gobbeldy-gook that pastors like to spout.

I know. I know about unconditional love. I was telling my jerk of a brother a few minutes ago that I have experienced that kind of love from five people--and I would say that my average is better than a lot of people, people who may never have known anybody who loved them without any strings attached.

You're saying that God's love is so unconditional that that's what the resurrection is about. God keeps promise, even over death. Jake, that's too good to be true. Yes, I know what Easter is about. Don't patronize me!

OK. I'm sorry. You're confusing me with grace. OK. I will make you a promise. I promise I won't do anything drastic. I will think about what you've said. Do me two favors. First, call Sara and tell her I'm OK. And then call me back in five minutes and pray with me.

In the meantime, I'm going to try to understand what Job went through when he argued with God. Let me tell you, Jake, God questions me all the time, but--you know what?--it just came to me how God always provides for me and those I love. I'm going to recite the only part of the Bible I'm sure I remember.

The Lord is my shepherd
I shall not want....