

What follows are two questions about Kemper's story, followed by three questions about The Book of Job. The questions are a bit longer than they've been in the past, and that's because Job is a dense, troubling, and truly great story, and therefore worth some pretty serious reflection.

Questions about Marjorie Kemper's "God's Goodness" from *Faith: Stories*.

Question 1, Kemper's story: The following is not a question, rather an invitation for reflection:

In the final scene of "God's Goodness," after Mike has died and just before Ling is to leave Mrs. Tipton's house "forever," (the scene begins on p. 65), Ling makes a couple of observations about God which suggest that her conception of Him has changed a great deal since she first went to work for the Tiptons.

The first observation has to do with God's having made "another beautiful day," though not for Mike.

"'God make another beautiful day, Mikey,' she said. Then, after blowing her nose and replacing the ragged Kleenex in the pocket of her sweater, she added, 'But this one not for you.'" (p. 65, *Faith: Stories*)

The implication of this observation, as I understand it, is that God persists in creating beauty whether we're here to receive it or not. (Anyone who has endured a spate of beautiful weather after the death of someone s/he loves knows how bewildering such "beauty" can feel.)

And the second observation comes on the next page, where we learn that despite Mike's death, Ling still sees in the flowers and the sunshine "evidence" of God's goodness. "Even here and even now. But this knowledge no longer lifted her up." (p. 66 *Faith: Stories*)

I know that when I first read the story and encountered these two quite extraordinary observations—God makes beauty whether we're here to receive it or not; God's goodness doesn't always leave us feeling "good"—I spent a lot of time thinking about them and trying to fill them out. But there's something in the observations themselves that almost resists logical reflection. How do you, as I say, "fill them out"? To particularize the question, how do they accord with your own experience? What is Ling seeing here?

Question 2, Kemper's story: This is a pretty obvious question, but hopefully still a useful one: Why do you think Mike has elected to read The Book of Job as he is dying?

On page 61 we learn that Job had “become a favorite” of Mike’s—that he has memorized “great hunks of it,” and that he reads it aloud to Ling. He even stops “mid-sentence” to “laugh.” Having recently read *The Book of Job* yourselves, what do you imagine Mike finds helpful, comforting, relieving, fortifying, in the story of Job? (I’ve thrown out multiple responses because the story doesn’t specify just how Mike responds to Job.) Why in the world would someone chose to read Job on the eve of his death? The New Testament I can certainly imagine reading on the eve of mine, Ecclesiastes, Psalms, Proverbs, even Genesis. But Job?

Questions about The Book of Job

Before we get to the questions, I’m going to outline my acquaintance with the Book of Job, so that you have some sense of where I’m coming from.

My acquaintance with *The Book of Job* is minimal. Years ago, before I started going to church regularly, I read it on the recommendation of a friend who had described it as a great poem. So it was under that application that I first encountered Job—as a work of literature. My first encounter with the text as *Christian* only happened this last month, in preparation for our meeting on Wednesday. I don’t know about you, but in recent weeks, as I have hovered over the text, I have found myself protecting the Christian in me--the Christian who is troubled by the differences I see between the god of *The Book of Job* and the god of the New Testament—with thoughts about literature and literary forms. I wonder if you have done the same. On the other hand, maybe literary thinking will help; maybe to address the structure of the poem, and the ways in which that structure engages us, will help us reconcile the God of Job with the God we know through Jesus. I genuinely don’t know. In any event, rather than push away my more personal response, I’m going to compose the following questions out of it, trusting that your response has been a personal and emotional one, too.

Question 1, Job: My first question is one of the more emotional ones, and it has nothing to do with literary form. It concerns the end of the poem, when the Lord appears to Job “out of the whirlwind” and speaks to him. I find myself amazed by the Lord’s answer to Job, but also made worried and disappointed by it. I’ll treat the amazement first.

If you remember, the Lord asks Job essentially where he was when the great forces of the natural world were created. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth (38: 4), when I “prescribed bounds” for the sea (38: 10), when I caused the dawn to “know its place” (38: 12)? I say that I find myself amazed because of the way this God thinks. He has considered the world from perspectives I never have, nor never would have. The wild ass, for instance. I had never imagined that its freedom had been established precisely so that it might “search” “after every green/ thing.” (39: 5-8). Look, too, at God’s account of why there are channels so rain can get to the desert, a “land where no one lives.” Why, we wonder, would God be worrying about irrigating a place where there is no thirst? “To satisfy the waste and desolate land,/ and to make the ground put

forth grass.” (38: 25-27). Again, this is a consciousness operating under very different objectives than mine, a consciousness that can span the reaches of the earth with lightening speed and in a language of such muscular precision that it *itself* seems like a physical, matter-moving force. And so I am, as I say, amazed; and, yes, comforted by my amazement, for I, too, am seen and known by this mighty mind.

However, I am *not* comforted by a mind that asks me to stop using my own. That’s how I read God’s answer to Job: Job, stop trying to know how I work, because you never will. I am unfathomable; the only kind of knowledge that counts is mine, and you don’t have that kind of knowledge. I (Emilie) have a hard time accepting this answer. I have a hard time accepting that my mind, a good 75 % of which, sure, is just a bunch of bogus arguments and unnecessary terrors--but surely some of which is composed *out of my love for God*--is useless in my attempts to remain near Him.

I use my own response here (which sounds pretty dumb at times, but oh well) to help you clarify your own response. Do you identify with these remarks? Why, or why not?

Question 2, Job: But here’s another way to think about God’s answer to Job. That way would be to try to accept the premise that knowledge and thought are not necessarily going to help when one is beset with radical despair. When God finally “speaks” to Job, he speaks in images, wanting, it would appear, to communicate to Job through Job’s senses, as opposed to merely through his reason. And the images he supplies are of the world before humankind held dominion over it. Through these images, Job sees a world in which he is no longer “fenced in” by conventional ways of understanding. (Frequently in the early chapters of the poem we hear about Job having been “fenced in” by God. See for example 1: 10 and 3:23.) In the last chapters, God, we might say, busts down the fences, redrawing for Job the horizon of what’s possible.

Do you identify with these remarks? Does this interpretation of God’s answer to Job satisfy you? If so, why has it satisfied you? And if not, what part of you have you had to leave out for it to work? (Again, I’m asking these incendiary, maybe even ignorant-sounding questions on the hope that they’ll help you clarify what you really think and feel about this story.)

Question 3, Job: This last question IS about literary form.

In our last Book Group meeting, we talked about how certain very innovative literary forms can teach us to see, think, perceive, “know,” in wholly new ways. For instance, we said that the strange hybrid world of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s “A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings,” a world made up of both the “magical” and the “real,” was the only world out of which one could effectively wrestle with the question, “How is a man like an angel?” (A question, we might add, not very different from one of the central questions of the New Testament: “How is man like God?”) We went on to say that the New Testament reads in places like “magical realism,” inviting us to occupy two worlds

at once, the “seen” one and the “unseen” one, to remember the title of Nora Gallagher’s memoir. It does seem that great stories act on us *experientially*, stripping us of certain of our faculties, and sharpening others, so that, as we close the book (or leave the church), what we feel is not so much that we have “read,” but that we have lived.

So, too, with The Book of Job. One thing we might do before meeting on Wednesday is to open Job again and try to remember what our experience was like as we read it for the first time. What I’m suggesting is that we respect that experience, even try to learn from it, rather than push it away. I know that I, for one, was at times very confused in my reading. Both the Friends and Job repeatedly contradict themselves, making any attempt to extract one cogent argument, one “right answer,” impossible. When the Lord finally speaks, it is out of a “whirlwind.” I don’t know about you, but I read that word, my thought was, “Yes, that’s what I feel like—that I am in a ‘whirlwind.’” Did you feel that way? And, if we grant the possibility that that was the experience the author wanted us to have—the experience of being in a whirlwind—what does that experience have to teach us?

A couple formal elements of the Book I’d like to point your attention to:

1. Ask yourself why it is that the author elected to tell the first scenes of the story in a fairly flat-seeming narrative; and then, when Job finally speaks (after seven days of silence), the author elected then to depart from narrative and have Job speak in verse.
2. Ask yourself why the story from then on must take the form of a dialogue, or—and this is slightly different—a debate.
3. Did you notice how the characters often echo one another? An image or a phrase that had appeared just a few verses earlier will occur in another character’s speech, often spun to mean something slightly different than it had the first time. The effect is confusing, cacophonous. Why do you think the author wants this echo-chamber effect?
4. Lastly, why do you think that when God finally speaks to Job, he asks him questions?