

**INTERNATIONAL WORSHIP SERVICE. DUKE DIVINITY SCHOOL.
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Readings: Job 28: 12-15; 20-28
Luke 24: 13-27

SPEAKING WITH AN ACCENT IN A WORLD OF THEOLOGICAL BLOGGING.

1. Accents, Wisdom and Cultural Production:

I do not know why they picked on me – for this is not so much for words, but for silence; for discerning languages and the many accents represented in this international worship. Talking about languages and accents, I miss the presence, here at DDS of a vibrant international community.

I particularly miss the presence of African students, many African students, so that they can chart in their tribal tongues; those who speak English with a heavy African accent; so heavy that professors would have to strain to hear what they are saying, and try to make sense of it.

In this way my own accent may not stand out....

But really – on a more serious note – I miss the presence of a vibrant and dynamic international community at DDS, because that would certainly help us a great deal in our search for wisdom and understanding.

Although we may not consider ourselves to be in the same dire situation as Job, we are facing the same challenge:

*Where can we find wisdom?
What is the path to understanding?*

That I suppose, is, if not **the** reason, at least one of the reasons, which led you to join Divinity School. I suppose you heard a rumor about Duke University, and DDS as a premier institution; as the place to be. You must have looked at the DDS brochure, and read the mission: to “form moral and intellectual character, and to create a community of reflective theological education.” That, certainly has to do with wisdom and understanding.

You made the right choice. But what we must now realize is the fact that discovering wisdom, and being set on a path to understanding in our time has to do with learning to discern accents, and learning to speak with an accent.

A culture of words:

Listening to and discerning accents in our time requires a special effort: for we live in a culture and a time of many words – many smooth, eloquent words.

- * America is a country of words, many words:-
 - The movie industry: Hollywood and other movie industries: tens of thousands of movies every year;
 - * The music industry, ten of thousands of new hits every year
 - * we live in a media age:
 - * It is a world of internet and e-mails (I was out of office for 2 days: 88 emails (I did not think of myself as being in the heavy traffic of email communication)
 - * instant messaging
 - * of blogs and blogging
 - * numerous channels on TV – all of them giving the same combination of soap operas, sports news, and tidbits of other-tertainment. A tel-marketer tried to sell me a cable TV package with 225 channels.
 - *On the surface, lots of choices – yet no choice. And endless monotony of monologues; Just like the 24 hour news channel, it is the same, boring endless commentary on the same

- It is all about words: You know what they say about the French: it does not matter what you say, as long as you say it well. That art has been refined here in America; this is a culture that has learnt to speak well of itself; and well to itself. And to the extent that we all are now living in the age of America, we aspire to speak well....

- Universities are part of this cultural production. They produce smart students who know how to coin new phrases, write brilliant essays and books, and provide sharp commentaries about the war, the economy and everything from the stars to butterflies.

- Theological schools and Divinity schools have been very well recruited in this cultural production.

- We expect students to write essays– yes, essays and more essays.

- But do not blame us the professors: we also under fire from the ATS, and APTCs criteria. We have to earn and prove out tenure by writing essays, books, and more books every year; some of them very good, the majority ...

- And so, the endless conversation in our halls: what are you working on now? when is your new book coming out... I have an essay that is coming out in the And just in case we have forgotten, Reed Criswell sends us timely reminders to turn in a report of our activities, which basically means a list of publications and public lectures... for the Divinity School Magazine.

- In some of my cynical moments I wonder whether our ‘theological production’ amounts to much more than an endless posting of theological blogs...

2. Job and Theological Blogging

In this our predicament is not unlike Job's predicament, Poor, old, Job.

Okay, I must admit I am Catholic, and I do not read the Bible very closely; I read the bible not so much for its literary pronouncements, but for its imagination. There is therefore something about the book of Job that I find to be very tragic.

We know the story very well. Job is dealing with very basic issues of life and death, of trust in God, of the meaning of life, of suffering...

But how the search soon turned into a long and boring series of monologues (34 long chapters)

I think Job is doing well in his quest for wisdom and understanding, until these three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar – these three theologians, these three graduates (SCL) from the Divinity school join the conversation in Chapter 3.

Thus from Chapter 3 onwards: what had been a sincere and humble search for wisdom, turns into an elaborate theological conversation (and a very boring one at that), as each of Job's three friends, as well as Job, are lost in their own theological convictions and articulation. It is not only what they say that is important to them, but how they say it: And so, what we have is really never a conversation: For none listens to the other; what we have is the posting of one theological blog after another. Sounds familiar?

Poor Job. How he is (seduced) drawn reluctantly into this endless theological blogging and becomes increasingly frustrated:

*Where can we find wisdom?
What is the path to understanding?*

It is not that in the endless speeches and theological articulations of the blogs one cannot pick some interesting insights about God's justice, about human unfaithfulness; about the need for repentance and humility.... All these insights, amount to, to use the language of Job, nothing but 'just rumors' about Wisdom and about God.

That is our challenge – how not to be drawn into a culture of words; how not to allow ourselves to be seduced not even by theology?

In this way, even more than Job, our predicament is not unlike that of the young man who enters the conversation in Chapter 32. His name is Elihu, son of Brachel. Job and his friends have exhausted themselves – or perhaps they are just pausing, preparing a new angle of attack.

Up to this point we did not even know that there was a fifth person in the room. Elihu had listened very attentively.

We are told he became angry of Job (for his self-righteousness) and Job's three friends because they had 'found no answer even though they had declared Job to be in the wrong.' (32:3). He knew there was something wrong about this conversation, this rich, 'interesting theological conversation'.

We also told that Elihu had waited to speak because he was young ----
This is very interesting:

- Elihu represents all you young people, passionate young people, who have come to Duke because you heard that there was something unique going on here— something that other schools were not offering.
- Elihu represents us, internationals have been reading and watching the drift of theological conversations and have been concerned, in fact some of us even angry, because of the way Western theology has not addressed the issues – simple issues like water, poverty, AIDS, impoverishment, that marks our particular geographic and historical locations.
- Elihu reminds me of women who have joined the theological conversation late – and angered by the fact that they had been hitherto excluded from this conversation together with many of their gendered concerns.
- Elihu speaks of black seminarians in America, who are angry – rightly angry - that the conversations in theology still up to now have failed to account for, let alone take seriously the experience of racism and slavery, and therefore these conversations do not speak meaningfully to the experience of black congregations.
- Elihu speaks of first year students who in coming to Divinity school, they are asking simple questions about God, about the church: who are first wowed! and intimidated by the theological articulation and the deeply layered analyses of theological texts they hear from their Middler and Senior colleagues... They wait, afraid to speak, but getting increasingly bored and angry with their colleagues inability to come to the ground.
- Elihu speaks of the young Pentecostal student, who finds the standard discussions about God and about church to be are sterile and very uninteresting....
- Elihu represents the student from a rural congregation in Georgia or Missisipi who is shaking her head as we wax eloquently about God as the Lord of history...
- Elihu represents all of us who have been waiting to see if the theological conversation will finally turn around to speak about what we really care about....

Finally, it is time for Elihu to speak; for us to say something. Unfortunately, Elihu has been around for long, and in spite of himself, and even unknown to himself, he has been lured by a culture of words, and so has lost the art, the gift to speak with an accent.

And so we get another five chapters, five long blogs of endless monologue about God, justice, righteousness

That precisely is our challenge: being seduced...

If God was silently hoping that this 'outsider' would interrupt the boring monologue that Job's search for wisdom had turned into, he was greatly disappointed.

3. Divine Interruption:

God cannot take it – (after enduring 35... Chapter 38 ..

Answers from a whirlwind – with a barrage of questions:

Where were you when I founded the earth?

Who determined its size, do you know?

And who shut within doors the sea, when it burst forth from the womb?

Have you ever in your lifetime commanded the morning and shown the dawn its place?

Which is the way to the dwelling place of light, and where is the abode of darkness?

Has the rain a father?

Do you hunt the prey for the lioness?

Do you know about the birth of mountain goats?

Who gives the wild ass his freedom?

And so many similar questions...

Simple questions, basic questions, about rain, earth, lakes and oceans, about the dawn, the rain, about lions, mountain goats.....

Of course God is not answering Job's questions;

And God's questions are not really questions that require an answer:

They are God's way of telling Job and his friends to 'stop'; shut up....;

God's way of interrupting the theological blogs

But they are also questions that are meant to draw Job and his friends to realities – simple everyday realities and interconnections through which wisdom is found.

Lessons:

It is an invitation for us not to take what we do here too seriously.

But rather, always to come back to the basics:

Where can we find wisdom; what is the path to understanding?

- It is also an invitation to see that our search for wisdom and understanding happens by way of interruption, and how, in a community like DDS: interruption can come through the presence of international students (although not necessarily), those who speak differently, especially with heavy accents bear different stories; the stories of mountain goats and wild donkeys.
- Through those who, within a very interesting class on Barth, Bonhoeffer or Wesley, are able to say: how does this affect the fate of a woman in Gulu in Uganda, or in a favella in Mexico? -- a woman that has no water, that is struggling with AIDS even as she takes care of her four young children?
- Those who will interrupt an interesting class on Grace, with questions of how this is related to the widespread of malaria in Africa, or the Tsunami disaster; or the lynching in Mississippi in the 1950s?
- One who even as everybody is talking about problematizing issues, destabilizing meanings, of postmodern moves, and about the ground being level at the foot of the cross, can ask such stupid questions as 'what cross'? Whose cross? What ground?
- It may be that the questions might sound banal, and stupid: Just like the stranger on the road to Emmaus:
- But these are the sort of questions that are able to set the hearts of the two disciples on fire... and their paths back to Jerusalem.
- The challenge of our time, because we live in a culture of many words, is not to find the relevant words; it is not to speak meaningfully, relevantly.
- But to be prepared for a life of constant interruption by the presence and questions: strange yet simple questions of the strangers.
- That interruption begins by learning to listen to and discern accents.
- And as we listen to and learn to discern accents, we discover that we ourselves have learnt to speak with an accent... as we excitedly 'go back to Jerusalem' to the path of understanding and wisdom..

- Unless we learn to listen attentively and discern accents, all our eloquent and beautiful theology will amount to a rumor about God; perhaps a powerful and interesting rumor, but a rumor nonetheless.
- But if we do, we will discover that our lives have already been interrupted. And even more, that we ourselves have learnt to speak with an accent – and as a result, are able to interrupt the monologue that this culture, our theologies, and we ourselves tend to be.
- That, as Job and his friends discover, is the true beginning of wisdom.