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THE EYES OF EXPERIENCE

A SERMON ON JOB 42.1-6

by REVEREND KENNETH E. KOVACS, PH.D.

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And Job answered Yahweh:

“I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’

Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.

‘Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.’

I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” (*New Revised Standard Version, Job 42.1-6*)

I wish scribes had etched in the text of Job, right at the start of Chapter 42, in big, bold letters: **STOP: SILENCE**. It’s been said, often by mystics, that all wisdom begins and ends in silence. One needs to be silent long enough for wisdom to emerge. And the Book of Job is all about wisdom, a particular kind of wisdom, which means engaging it requires silence.

The Book of Job is one of the most challenging books in the Bible. Along with Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Psalms, Proverbs, Wisdom, and Sirach, the Book of Job belongs to the genre of scripture known as wisdom literature.¹ Originally ascribed to Moses, its author is unknown. It was written somewhere between the seventh and fourth centuries before the Common Era, most likely in the sixth century BCE, when Israel was in exile in Babylon. It’s often assumed that the story is trying to address the theodicy question: Why do the righteous or innocent suffer?

A thorough reading of the text, however, suggests that the narrative never really gives a convincing answer to this question. Scholars suspect that the Book of Job was included in the biblical canon in response to inadequate theological claims found in Deuteronomy, namely that blessing comes only by following God’s Law, that is, that blessing is a reward for remaining faithful to the covenant with Yahweh.² The author of Job knows that things are not that simple, that life, especially life with Yahweh, is infinitely more complex.

Here’s an overview of the story. In the opening verses, we read: “There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil” (1.1). Job is described as a wealthy man, with seven sons, three daughters, and a beloved wife. The story’s attention then shifts to the

¹ Wisdom and Sirach are deuterocanonical texts placed in the Apocrypha by Protestant Bible translators.

² For an in-depth exploration of theological themes and historical contexts in the Book of Job, see Janzen. Both the Hebrew and Christian testaments are dialogical in nature: they answer, respond to, react to, and redact the multiple traditions and sources of which they are made.

court of heaven, where “heavenly beings,” including Satan—Satan is understood here to be a member of Yahweh’s court, not the personification of evil—present themselves before the throne.³ Satan questions Job’s piety, suggesting that Job’s devotion to Yahweh is conditional, that he worships Yahweh only because of Yahweh’s blessings. Yahweh agrees to Satan’s plan to test Job. And so Job’s wealth and children are removed. Job responds: “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there: Yahweh gave, and Yahweh has taken away; blessed be the name of the Yahweh” (1.21). Satan continues to torment Job further, inflicting him with painful sores and boils on his skin such that he sits among the ashes in mourning. Job refuses to give up on Yahweh.

Three friends arrive—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—to talk with Job, to help him make sense of his suffering, to search for meaning. They believe that Job’s suffering is a punishment for sin. But how can this be, since Job is “blameless and upright”? Still, Job struggles with what’s happening to him. He searches for wisdom in the midst of his suffering and finds little. At a moment of extreme frustration, he says, “I loathe my life; I will give free utterance to my complaint; I will speak in the bitterness of my soul” (10.1). And so he directs his complaint toward Yahweh: “Why did you bring me from the womb? Would that I had died before any eye had seen me, and were as though I had not been, carried from the womb to the grave. Are not the days of my life few? Let me alone, that I may find a little comfort before I go, never to return, to the land of gloom and deep darkness, the land of gloom and chaos, where light is like darkness” (10.18-22).

Job’s suffering and frustration deepen. “My skin turns black and falls from me, and my

bones burn with heat. My lyre is turned to mourning, and my pipe to the voice of those who weep” (20.30-31). Job makes one more declaration of his innocence before he is silenced. The three “friends” go away, and a new voice begins to speak. It is Elihu, who rebukes Job and explains to him that only the kind of wisdom that comes from God is sufficient for the sufferings and burdens of life. “For God speaks in one way, and in two, though people do not perceive it. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on mortals, while they slumber on their beds, then he opens their ears. . .” (33.14-15).

And then, finally, out of the whirlwind, Yahweh answers Job: “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me. . .” (38.2-4). Then, on and on, Yahweh speaks in these wild sermons out of the whirlwind, Chapters 38 through 41. Yahweh responds to Job’s unyielding demand for an explanation for his suffering. Yahweh cross-examines Job with question after question. The Voice shakes Job’s foundation, shatters everything he assumes and believes—about himself, his neighbors, his precarious hold on reality, his place in the universe, even his image of the God. On and on and on, Yahweh graciously assaults the old man’s sensibilities and reason, questions everything Job thought he knew about everything. Then, at the end of Chapter 41, Yahweh stops speaking.

And it’s precisely here, I suggest, that silence is called for. Instead, the Bible offers a seamless transition from Chapter 41 to these extraordinary verses in Chapter 42, when Job answers Yahweh. Let’s hear these verses again, this time using Stephen Mitchell’s poetic translation of the text:

³ It is significant to note that in Job, Satan is a member of the court of Yahweh, not the personification of evil; the latter portrayal develops later within Judaism. In Job, Satan is on God’s payroll, as it were. *Ha-Satan* in Hebrew means “the adversary” or “the accuser.”

Then Job said to the Unnamable:
 I know you can do all things
 and nothing you wish is impossible.
*Who is this whose ignorant words
 cover my design with darkness?*
 I have spoken of the unspeakable and tried to grasp the infinite.
Listen and I will speak;
I will question you: please, instruct me.
 I had heard of you with my ears; but now my eyes have seen you.
 Therefore I will be quiet, comforted that I am dust. (88)

Now, there's a lot going on in these six verses. It's essential that we follow the flow of this exchange between Job and Yahweh and between Job and himself.

Again, it's here, in this liminal space between Chapters 41 and 42, that we need to create space for silence: *hold your tongue, hush, listen, behold*. At this point I imagine Job speechless, breathless, gasping for air, traumatized, in shock. Before him, from out of the whirlwind, is the Voice of the Unnamable, the Holy One, this *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, this mystery that fascinates even as it overwhelms.⁴

Imagine yourself in Job's skin. Put yourself in his experience. Imagine what his encounter with Yahweh must have felt like for him. What does one say in such a moment? What does one say in a moment of being totally overwhelmed, the kind that leaves you speechless? What do you say when you're completely overcome by life or reality, struck by beauty or tragedy (perhaps both at the same time)? How do you respond? What is there to say? Often there's nothing to say. Language is inadequate. And so we are brought to silence.

Then, from out of the silence, with humbled conviction born of experience, Job begins to speak. And it's precisely here, I think, that we



William Blake, *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (1826), Plate 13. Yahweh answering Job from out of the whirlwind (Job 38.1).

find the theological nerve center of the Book of Job. Job's answer to Yahweh, his response here, is wild and electric like the voice of God. Job acknowledges, "I know you can do all things and nothing you wish is impossible." Then Job recalls the question Yahweh first poses to him from out of the whirlwind. But now Job turns the question toward *himself* and asks: "Who is this whose ignorant words cover my design with darkness?"⁵ Who, indeed? Who is this God? Wrestling with the truth now unfolding before him,

⁴ See Mitchell's translation, page 88.

⁵ This is originally asked of Job in 38.2.



William Blake, Yahweh answering Job from out of the whirlwind (Job 38.1).
From the Linell watercolor set, 1821.

Job confesses this stunning insight: “I have spoken of the unspeakable and tried to grasp the infinite.”

Job begins to recall other words from Yahweh, when Yahweh sarcastically chastised him for his arrogant complaints: “Listen and I will speak: I will question *you*, please, instruct me.”⁶

And then Job, finally, comes to the moment of revelation, a moment of life-changing insight. In profound realization, he says, “I had heard

of you with my ears; but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore, I will be quiet, comforted that I am dust.”

From silence to silence.

It’s easy to overlook the significance of Job’s confession here. Many turn to Job searching for reasons why the innocent suffer. As stated earlier, the text never really provides a convincing response to the theodicy question. But there’s another way to read the text.

Centuries ago, it was William Blake (1757-1827) who proposed a different interpretive lens worthy of consideration. Blake spent an

⁶ This is originally directed at Job in 40.7; emphasis is mine.

enormous amount of time immersed in Job's story, eventually producing twenty-two marvelous engravings illustrating it through his singular theological lens. For Blake, the Book of Job is less about why the innocent suffer than it is about personal *transformation*.⁷ It's about the change, the *metanoia* that occurs when we come to the limits of our knowing and find ourselves confronted by the face of the living God.

You see, prior to the whirlwind, Job's moral universe is clearly intact, consisting of well-defined distinctions between right and wrong. When the Book of Job was written, it was assumed that individuals received either reward or punishment for their actions. God was understood to be the judge. "Job's [initial] case against God assumes not that the [judicial] system is wrong. . . but that God has failed to govern the created order justly" (Hester 88). In other words, Job questions God's justice. Job is subsequently questioned by God, however, and soon discovers that the system is not what he thought it was, that there's more going on around him than meets the eye. This is what Jungian analyst James Hollis refers to as "the collapse of our tacit contract with the universe—the assumption that if we act correctly, if we are of good heart and good intentions, things will work out. We assume a reciprocity with the universe. If we do our part, the universe will comply. Many ancient stories, including the Book of Job, painfully reveal the fact that there is no such contract. . ." To discover this is one of the "most powerful shocks" we can experience.⁸

Exhausted, desperate, Job hits a theological wall. He discovers that the religious views of his community—all the things he learned in "Sabbath school"—are not equal to the existential challenge of facing Yahweh, the

apparent injustices in the world, and the complexities of reality. In other words, Job's theological worldview is insufficient to the task before him. He cannot speak to the complexity of his experience, this man who has been to hell and back, who has looked into the face of the void, having lost family, friends, the flesh on his bones; who, full of sores and grieving in ashes, asks, *Why? Why?* Job's trauma calls into question *everything*. He arrives at a point where his understanding of God (that is, his image of God or God-image) can no longer yield sufficient meaning in the face of horrific tragedy. While Job never gives up on God—at one point his wife tells him just to "[c]urse God, and die" (Job 2.9)—in the end, Job discovers that he has to give up his old understanding of God and God's justice in order to experience something radically new. What's more, he cannot experience this on his own. He becomes capable of it only when he comes up against his limits.

At one point (or many), we all hit a similar wall when we realize that our perspectives are too narrow and limited and we're called (or sometimes forced) to yield to a wider frame of knowing. In his essay *A Defense of Poetry*, written in 1821, poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) writes that poetry "purg[es] the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being."⁹ Something of the same is required in order for us to "see" God. The "film of familiarity" is wiped away and we're allowed to see something anew. Job confronts the inadequacy of his former ways of framing the world. His new experience yields a wider, more comprehensive view of reality, of justice, even of God. It's a gracious reframing of his world, his self, the God he thought he knew—something far more profound and expansive. Job's vision changes everything.

⁷ *Illustrations of the Book of Job* was completed in 1825 and published in 1826. See Raine and Edinger.

⁸ Hollis suggests that this discovery often takes place during one's middle years, the so-called "Middle Passage."

⁹ Published posthumously by Edward Moxon. Cited on page 50 in Bishop.

I believe similar visions do occur, not necessarily in the literal sense (although I'm sure that's possible), but in varieties of experience that yield a similar reframing of existence. I'm using *seeing* here as a metaphor for transformed perception. I'm talking about a moment or many moments over the course of a lifetime—moments of extraordinary insight, encounters with the numinous, religious experiences of significant power and terror and even beauty—when the Holy helps us “see” what we could not “see” before, giving us new “spectacles,” as John Calvin (1509-1564) likes to say (135), allowing us to see more clearly in the “theatre” of God's glory.

To see. That's the critical point.¹⁰ Says Job: “I had heard of you with my ears”—that is, before—“but now my eyes see you.” *My eyes.* *My experience.* Wisdom received through my perception, not someone else's. More than hearing *about* God, Job comes to know God for himself firsthand. And yet, significantly, what Job is able to discern, what he's able to perceive, comes to him only upon hearing the Voice from out of the whirlwind. Job's ability to see with fresh eyes is contingent upon what he *hears*. This should not be surprising given the value, within Israel's experience, placed on hearing. “Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deuteronomy 6.4). Yahweh consistently summons people to hear. The divine Word speaks, and when heard, new worlds come into being. Lives are formed and reformed; perspectives are changed, transfigured; and we are given a new set of “eyes” to perceive ourselves, our neighbors, and the world.¹¹

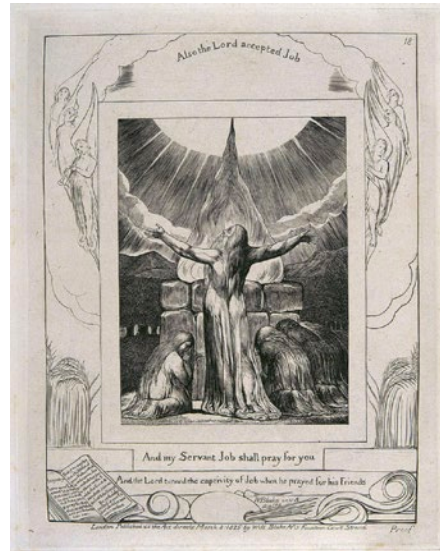
Job discovers the inadequacy of faith that comes through hearsay, the kind that is passed on from others and received passively. It's been said that “[t]he person who hungers and thirsts after justice is not satisfied with a menu. It is not enough for [one] to hope or believe or know that there is absolute justice in the universe: [one] must taste and see it” (Mitchell xxvii). Surely Job had heard about God, about what God is like. He had lived secure in his understanding—that is, until everything falls apart. What he receives graciously in the end is not the inherited faith of tradition nor the pious platitudes of well-intentioned family and friends, but something far more valuable, something that comes through his own existential encounter—a journey only he can take, yielding wisdom learned not from afar nor at arm's length but within his guts, his heart. It is something of God that cannot be taught in a classroom or found in a book. It has to be *felt*.

Now, all of this might appear plainly obvious, not terribly significant or even radical. However, within the Reformed theological tradition (where I stand, theologically), giving too much weight to personal religious experience often makes us very uneasy.¹² Reformed Christians (and we are certainly not alone here) live with an ongoing tension between what is known through *revelation*—God's truth, wisdom, and grace come “down” from above, as it were—and *human experience*. Theologically speaking, it's a question of epistemology. How does one come to know what one knows? How does one come to know God, to trust in Christ, to experience grace? Generally speaking, the Reformed tradition stresses that whatever we know of

¹⁰ The use of “seeing” may be problematic, particularly for those who are visually impaired. “Sight” is to be interpreted metaphorically (as perception, awareness, a way of coming to understanding) as well; a literal interpretation is not necessary.

¹¹ The early followers of Jesus of Nazareth viewed him as “the Word [become] flesh” who “lived among us, and we have seen his glory. . .” (John 1.14). The voice of Yahweh is heard in Jesus. Similarly, Christians are summoned to “listen to him.” See Matthew 17.5.

¹² The Reformed theological tradition is a major branch of Protestantism generally associated with the thought and practice of John Calvin (1509-1564) in Geneva, Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) and Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575) in Zürich, and John Knox (c. 1514-1572) in Edinburgh. Today, the heirs of this tradition are part of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, which has 218 member churches, denominations in 107 countries around the world, and some 75 million members. <http://wrcr.ch/>



William Blake, *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (1826).
Job's sacrifice (Job 42.8).

God comes to us because God chooses to reveal it to us directly. This knowledge does not emerge naturally, that is, by way of human reason or subjective experience. It is given, and we receive it. We don't move toward such knowledge; it's a gift. The Reformed tradition privileges God's revelation and is reluctant to put too much stock in the authority of human experience.¹³ Implicit in this view is the belief that experience cannot always be trusted because all of our faculties of discernment are "fallen," subject to error, "bound" by the power of sin, and therefore distorted and thus inadequate. And so the Reformed tradition prefers to build its theological systems on so-called "objective" ideas gathered from an authoritative text. Again, trusting experience can be messy, complicated. How can it be verified? Substantiated? It's far too

¹³ In many respects, C. G. Jung's so-called gnostic bent, privileging personal experience or knowledge over the authority of tradition and religious institutions, helpfully exposes some of the shortcomings of the Reformed outlook. I contend that Jung offers a necessary and needed critique of the Reformed tradition while remaining situated within the Reformed tradition. In this sense he is very Protestant and very Reformed: *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* (the Church reformed and always being reformed). Indeed, Jung claims to stand on the extreme left wing of Protestantism (CW 11.537). Sonu Shamdasani believes that Jung "sees what's been lost in Protestantism," namely "individual symbol formation" (*Lament for the Dead* 119).

individualistic. And it's risky. Is divine revelation "finished" or "closed," or can there be new things to discover? Can human experience be a medium of revelation? If so, will there be wisdom or knowledge that emerges from personal experience that goes beyond or even supersedes what we find within the received Jewish and Christian traditions? These are enormous theological questions. Even the suggestion that new revelation is possible borders on heresy for some Christians.

Yet, for all these concerns (and they need to be taken seriously), experience still has to count for something, doesn't it? We need to lift up something often forgotten in religious communities: experience of God is prior to dogmatic formulation; indeed, experience grounds conviction. All that we know in our hearts; all that we know deep in our souls; all of our losses, our traumas, our sufferings, our relationships, our gifts, our personalities; what is both conscious and unconscious; all of these are caught up in the mix of what we know of God and how we know God. Augustine (354-430) asserts, "To know myself is to know you, O God."¹⁴ Yes, theology isn't biography, but we can't disconnect the two that easily; we must not discount the value of human experience.

And yet, sadly, there are people both in and outside the Church who have been told not to trust their experiences. They've been taught to question the value of their feelings and experiences, to discount them. For example, I know there are countless people in the Church who have had profound religious experiences, but never say a word about them. Why is this? And there are countless others who have had profound religious experiences and left the Church because they couldn't find a community that took them seriously. There are people who are hungry to share something of what they have learned through

¹⁴ *Viderim me, viderim te*. Quoted by St. Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582) in *The Interior Castle, The Complete Works of St. Teresa*.

their encounters with God, experiences not that dissimilar to Job's. They want to be faithful to their experience, both individually as well as in community.

In one of her letters, Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) wisely writes, "Conviction without experience makes for harshness" (97). We run the risk of becoming exceptionally harsh in emphasizing conviction and ignoring, if not silencing, the experiences of sisters and brothers who want to tell us something of God's transforming love.

I've found that far too many people fail to honor their experience. I have, regrettably and far too many times, discounted the value of mine. Instead, maybe, just maybe, we're called to value and anticipate an experience of God, even if doing so means refusing to fit it unquestioningly into traditional teachings. Even if it means opening ourselves "to new possibilities and surprises," as theologian David Ford suggests, "even in the sphere of [our] core convictions." And even if it means becoming "[people] who above all cry out with integrity before God and resist all attempts to misinterpret, marginalize, or stifle that cry" (129).

Such openness and integrity were especially true of the depth psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961). His experience is especially relevant here, given that he came from a long line of Reformed pastors. Jung's father was a Swiss Reformed pastor near Basel, but Jung himself did not find any life in his father's faith. Jung was told that his First Communion would be a life-altering experience. Instead—nothing. "For me it was an absence of God and no religion," he said. "Church was a place to which I no longer could go. There was no life there, but death" (*Memories, Dreams, Reflections* 57). From an early age Jung had profound encounters with the Holy that forever changed the course of his life; even though they overwhelmed and scared him, he knew there was power to heal in them. They

offered him hope, and he would spend the rest of his life trying to be faithful to them despite considerable resistance. They were, he said, moments of experience of a "direct living God. . ."—the God that his father lacked and could not give to him. As Jung put it, "God alone was real—annihilating fire and an indescribable grace" (73). I love that. *Annihilating fire. Indescribable grace.*

In one of his last great works, *Mysterium Coniunctionis* (1955), Jung writes, "The experience of the Self is always a defeat for the ego" (546). While this might sound like a dogmatic assertion, the ground of this conviction was Jung's own personal encounter with what he described as the *Mysterium*, in 1913, just after his break with Sigmund Freud (1856-1939).¹⁵ What does Jung mean by Self? "The term 'Self,'" Edward F. Edinger (1922-1998) explains, "is used by Jung to designate a transpersonal center and totality of the psyche. It constitutes the greater objective personality, whereas the ego is the lesser, subjective personality. Empirically, the Self cannot be distinguished from the God-image. An encounter with it is a *mysterium tremendum*" (7). Ultimately it's this encounter with the Self or God-image, the *mysterium tremendum*, that transforms and transfigures Job's reality.¹⁶

Experiences of the Holy are not anomalies or signs of pathology. They should be anticipated. They are occurring all the time and they need to be valued, honored, and respected within worshiping communities (maybe especially there) as well as in the consulting room of the psychoanalyst.¹⁷

¹⁵ The *Mysterium* encounter begins on December 21 and concludes on Christmas Day in 1913. Jung writes, "The mystery showed me in images what I should afterward live" (*The Red Book* 207).

¹⁶ Edinger holds a similar understanding of the Book of Job, in that it "represents an individual ego's decisive encounter with the Self, the Greater Personality. The ego is wounded by this encounter which provokes a descent into the unconscious, a *neykia*. Because Job perseveres in questioning the meaning of the experience, his endurance is rewarded by a divine revelation. The ego, by holding fast to its integrity, is granted a realization of the Self" (11).

¹⁷ I explore these ideas in "How Jung Led Me Away From Toward Christianity," C. G. Jung Society of Atlanta Newsletter, November 2014. <http://www.jungatlanta.com/articles/fall14-jung-led-me.pdf>

In the end, Job's story says to us, *This* is what it's like to encounter the living God, to *know* God, not know *about* God. Not someone else's encounter, not someone else's story, not someone else's experience. Not a dead tradition, but a living faith. It looks something like this: a life-changing, frame-bending experience of earthshattering significance, of radical insight, that comes over, around, in, through, and to us and opens our eyes—our eyes, not someone else's eyes, but ours—and allows us to see reality transfigured and transformed,¹⁸ to see a new world, which despite all the pain and suffering and sorrow of our lives still has the capacity to yield meaning. It is an experience of the Living God that grounds all of our theological claims and creeds and epistemologies, that sets our hearts on fire and fires our imaginations, that sends us down new roads, wherever God wants to take us, following along with eyes that now can see.¹⁹

Holy One, give us more to see; give us ever more to see.

This has become my prayer.

¹⁸ See Loder and Kovacs' *The Relational Theology of James E. Loder: Encounter and Conviction*.

¹⁹ I'm alluding here to the healing of the blind man Bartimaeus, a passage found in Mark 10.46-52, which could be a companion text to the Job reading. "Jesus and his disciples went to Jericho. And as they were leaving, they were followed by a large crowd. A blind beggar by the name of Bartimaeus son of Timaeus was sitting beside the road. When he heard that it was Jesus from Nazareth, he shouted, 'Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!' Many people told the man to stop, but he shouted even louder, 'Son of David, have pity on me!' Jesus stopped and said, 'Call him over!' They called out to the blind man and said, 'Don't be afraid! Come on! He is calling for you.' The man threw off his coat as he jumped up and ran to Jesus. Jesus asked, 'What do you want me to do for you?' The blind man answered, 'Master, I want to see!' Jesus told him, 'You may go. Your eyes are healed because of your faith.' Right away the man could see, and he went down the road with Jesus." (*Contemporary English Version*)

REVEREND KENNETH E. KOVACS, Ph.D.

Reverend Kenneth E. Kovacs, Ph.D., is pastor of the Catonsville Presbyterian Church, Catonsville, near Baltimore, Maryland (USA), and has served congregations in St. Andrews, Scotland, and Mendham, New Jersey. Kenneth studied at Rutgers College, Yale Divinity School, Princeton Theological Seminary, and received his Ph.D. in theology from the University of St. Andrews, St. Andrews, Scotland. The author of *The Relational Theology of James E. Loder: Encounter & Conviction* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), his current research areas include C. G. Jung and contemporary Christian experience. Kenneth is also an avid traveler and has led pilgrimages/tours to Scotland, Italy, Turkey, and Greece.

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The Eyes of Experience – A Sermon on Job 42.1-6
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