Like four wheels spinning in the sand, the arguments of Job and his four friends have by now arrived effectively nowhere, creating only around them the empty space of a deep rut, a void, an absence. And then from out of the void, there comes a storm. And with the storm, a voice.

With God’s theophany or sudden appearance here in the form of a whirlwind, I picture something like a summer thunderstorm forming over the lake, something at once beautiful and terrifying. Or I picture something like the first heavy snow of winter, the blizzard-like-voice leaving behind an old landscape that’s now made shining and new. With these verses it’s as if there’s a new quality of light, a new vividness that’s brought to the story of Job—or as the Job poet puts it, describing quite beautifully how the morning light of the dawn grabs hold of the sky like it’s a blanket and shakes off the last light of the stars—"All things are touched with color; the whole world is changed."

Previously in the dialogues Job had asked, again and again, for a response from God. It seems that old saying, “be careful what you wish for,” might be appropriate here, as with these whirlwind passages, Job is granted his request, although surely not in the manner that he, and we, might have expected. To Job’s question about the meaning of life, God responds with nothing that resembles an answer, but instead responds with a deluge of questions.

Job asks why this great loss was visited upon him, and the voice asks if Job was there when the foundations of the earth were laid; Job asks where's the justice, and the voice asks if Job can hear the morning stars singing for joy; Job asks why the innocent suffer, and the voice asks from whose womb does the ice come; Job asks why, and the voice points to a war horse charging into battle; to Job’s great sigh that’s too deep for words, the voice doesn’t tell him anything new but instead tries to show him something—a deer calving, an ostrich laughing, the lioness feeding her cubs, the vultures picking at the bloody remains.

For many readers, these responses don't satisfy. God's barrage of questions can even seem cruel, as if the strategy is to bully Job into submission. I think there may be some truth to this interpretation, but it seems there might also be something more going on here—what if, for one thing, there’s a message here about the nature of questions and answers? Whether, for example, an answer is really what we're after when we ask a question. God's questions certainly aren't the type that invite an answer.

Unlike the questions that Job and his friends consider, when the voice in the whirlwind asks a question the intent isn't to argue or to prove or disprove a point, but rather the intent is to evoke a feeling, and to offer an image up for consideration. These questions, then, aren't the questions of the philosophers debating the ultimate matters of life—the
true, the good, the beautiful, the just—but are instead the questions of the poet-scientist, inviting us to embark on a thrilling tour of the wonders of the natural world.

Wonder is an interesting word here. It can both describe the thing in question—we can call something ‘a wonder’—and it can also describe the experience that the object elicits. This tour of the universe and its creatures then is wonderful in the fullest sense as it presents both a vast, panoramic survey of the orders of creation—cosmology, meteorology, zoology—together with a sense-sharpening eye for detail—the way the mountain goat crouches in the crags to give birth; the wings of the ostrich, how they lack plumage yet nevertheless flap wildly.

While Job might not get exactly what he’s looking for with this response, there’s still the question of whether he’s comforted by this exhilarating vision of life. I found myself wondering this week—is Job satisfied thinking of how, as I think the voice implies, nature is its own abundance? About how the universe as it is resists all our attempts to project our ideas of how things should be upon it? About how there’s always birth together with death, beauty together with violence, glory together with vulnerability, love together with indifference? This passage has also been called the least anthropocentric passage in all of Scripture, and so I wonder, how does Job feel about humanity’s place being that simply of one creature among many, each equally inestimable and irreplaceable in God’s eyes? And more importantly—how do we today feel? Are we comforted with this vision? Are we satisfied with a glimpse of the universe as it really is—with ourselves being simply a part of creation, and decidedly not at its center?

Job, in the end, is able to find a type of comfort or satisfaction within this sweeping and searing vision of the world. The speeches from the whirlwind, drenched as they are with such poetic beauty, actually accomplish something tangible, as Job finds himself beginning to move beyond frustration and grief, and towards returning to the creaturely joy and drama of living again.

In many ways, the world that we live in and the world Job lived in aren’t that different in the end. The questions of life remain the same—why are we here, what are we to do with our time, what does it all mean? And yet, perhaps in a significant way, the world as we find it today is a rather different place. When, for example, in his grief Job found a renewing message of comfort and hope through turning to the phenomena of the natural world, today, when we find ourselves turning towards creation for comfort and hope, we often find ourselves turning from one place of grief to another. We turn to the animals, and we hear about many of them are struggling for survival—geologists claim that we’ve entered the Sixth-Holocene extinction event, a time when the extinction rate is several hundred times greater than the normal background rate, a time when some estimate that over 100,000 species are becoming extinct each year, which is a staggering, almost unfathomable amount of species loss to consider.

Or on the other hand, whereas Job found comfort in the fact that the weather would always be a phenomenon beyond the realm of human comprehension and control, today we also look to the skies for comfort, but we find a climate full of tumult and confusion. Extreme drought in some places, unprecedented flooding in others. Extreme heat,
extreme cold. The ice caps melting, the oceans rising. The levels of CO2 steadily building.

In the end, I find myself this morning placing my faith in the idea that the similarities between our world and Job’s world outweigh the differences. Job, remember, also found himself in something like an ecological crisis—everything that had previously sustained his way of life in a pleasant equilibrium suddenly started to disintegrate around him—losing first his land, then his livestock, then his family, then his health. His experience was like that of finding his environment thrown into a state of disarray.

And then from out of the chaos, from out of the whirlwind, there came a voice, as if the universe itself had something to say to him, as if life couldn’t let Job end on a note of grief. What if creation is seeking a similar communication with us today as well, even if it’s in the form of what the philosopher Hans Jonas called “the outcry of mute things”? What if there’s a voice that’s trying to speak to us through the contemporary whirlwind of a changing climate?