

October 21 – Pentecost +22

Job 38: 1-7, 34-41

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Job+38%3A1-7%2C+34-41&version=NRSV>

Hebrews 5:1-10

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Hebrews+5:1-10>

Mark 10:35-45

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+10:35-45>

Well it's here, my last Sunday. I didn't know whether I should have prepared a goodbye talk, or give something more like a farewell message with encouragement, or tell you what I really think of some of you since I won't be here tomorrow (*a joke!*)...or just preach like I usually do. I'm going mostly with the latter in an attempt to stay on track for worship and keep the tears at bay while I can.

Last week I mentioned that the book of Job has spoken to many people, in many centuries, in many ways. Some have looked at Job with a theological and philosophical perspective, as to how a good God can allow suffering. Some have viewed Job as a champion of patience in the midst of suffering and turmoil. Perhaps Job's words are your words, searching for God who is not found, and all you want to do is hide in the darkness.

And I also said that Job cries out and shouts at God, and in a sense gives us permission to shout at God too because God is big enough to take it. And today we see an excerpt of how God responds to Job's questions. Please understand that this response isn't just God brushing Job off, or something like saying leave me alone, I've got bigger things to worry about. Actually the responses attributed to God might not be all that helpful for some people, but I think it allows us to explore the breadth of God in a way we can easily forget. Sometimes we might think of God as Creator when we see a beautiful sunset, or Provider when we celebrate Thanksgiving. Or when we sing hymns we might think of God as Immortal, Invisible, God only wise; and Holy, Holy, Holy, God in Three Persons, blessed Trinity. But I find these responses almost like a reminder to Job, and to us, as a "hey, think about who you're talking to."

Traditionally there's the concept or understanding that good things happen to good people, bad things to bad people; we see this in the New Testament when someone asks about someone with an illness or disease, who sinned this man or his parents? But it forces us to confront our assumptions and what we think we know about God – is life and the world just an elaborate reward/punishment system? Is it possible that good things can happen to bad people, or bad things to good people? If so how does our theology and understanding of God and the world change to this into consideration?

This section in Job makes me pause and think about what it means for God laying the foundation of the earth, and determining measurements for the world. "The morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy." Inasmuch as Job is an ancient poem and not every word is necessarily meant to be taken literally, it's quite fascinating the scientists have noted that plants emit frequencies which can be detected, and they're unique from one another depending on the number of particles around them and the strength of their magnetic fields.

When we think about the intricacies of the universe, our own world, even our own bodies, it really makes you stop and wonder about things – it forces us to question our understanding of creation, evolution, and intelligent design.

Sometimes our understanding of God is limited by characteristics and attributes, and it's similar for Jesus when we think about it. Christmastime is when we really look at more names outside of Messiah, and Son of God. We think about Emmanuel – God with us, the Prince of Peace, Counselor. These are all important aspects of who Jesus is. And what we see in Hebrews is the writer exploring another aspect of Jesus, as priest. Sometimes we can clump three characteristics of Jesus together: prophet, priest, and king. Maybe it's because of the familiar hymn "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sound" but Jesus as priest is a new attribute the writer gives.

And it might seem so natural for us to think of Jesus as priest, but let's just explore the function and role of priest, specifically high priest, as the ancient Israelites did. Today, as in the past, there were certain places in the house of worship and actions that only priests could do. The quintessential component of being priest revolved around sacrifice. When someone sinned they would provide certain animals to atone for their sacrifice. The sins of the individual would be transferred to a pure animal – one that was spotless without blemish we read – and the animal would be killed, consumed by fire, and the person would be made put in a right relationship with God again. The priest acted as a mediator, representing sinful humankind before a holy God. The priest, through God, mediated forgiveness. The high priest was the only person, however, who once a year could enter into the holy of holies, which was where God's presence dwelled. You can read about the traditions for Yom Kippur and the day of atonement, but for now let's recognize that the high priest served an important role in atoning for the sins of the nation of Israel.

When we read scripture we know that Jesus worshiped as a Jew, attending and participating at the synagogue, but Jesus wasn't part of a recognized religious group like Pharisees, or priests, much less high priest. So what's the writer of Hebrews saying? In portraying Jesus as high priest, the reader comes to see Jesus as a mediator between a sinful humankind before a holy God. Jesus is unique because He is at the same time fully human and fully divine, and able to recognize the fullness and complexities of both worlds. Unlike Job who understands only the human experience, and unlike God the creator rather than the created, Jesus is able to navigate both worlds. And as important and interesting as that is, what's special about Jesus as high priest is that He provides the sacrifice to make humans whole again and forgiven, and that sacrifice is His very self. A pure, sinless being, killed and poured out so that humankind can be forgiven, made whole, and put in a right relationship with God again.

This is a traditional atonement theory of understanding Jesus as the Lamb of God that is sacrificed for the sins of the world. And this is probably how many, if not most, of us understand the cross, and forgiveness. This is how I came to understand what it meant to be forgiven by accepting Jesus. I remember asking my brother how I'm forgiven just by saying a prayer, and what does it mean for Jesus to be the Lamb of God.

But our understanding of sacrifice and forgiveness is so different from that of the ancient Israelites. And sometimes, as we see with Job and exploring good and evil in broad terms, it can be helpful – even necessary – to rework our theology and understanding of what we think we know about God.

In my last year at seminary we took a class called Doctrines of Reconciliation, where we explored different writers and theologians over the past two thousand years, and how various men and women have come to understand reconciliation and the symbolism and role of Jesus in it. I remember really being changed by Martin Luther and appreciating some his works. This has been a really busy week, so forgive me if I misquote Luther, or misinterpret him because I didn't have the time to check my facts, but Luther talks about a Theology of the Cross. There's a lot you can unpack in it, there is a lot you can read about it, there are points I can't touch on in the timeframe of this sermon, but essentially what I remember is the idea that Christ doesn't die for us, Christ dies with us. Christ doesn't die *for* us, Christ dies *with* us.

I've found these words and this idea so powerful because it has withstood the challenges put forth by other theologies. What does it mean when we operate with an ancient understanding like people during the time of Job, and we expect those who follow God's commands to be blessed and those who do not to be cursed? What happens when bad things happen to good people, and good things to bad?

I was looking at a dvd recently that looked at the lives of three different people, and their challenges in life, and how their faith changed or developed through them. An American female, whose husband had passed away, talked about going to Africa on a mission trip sort of thing with women whose husbands had died from AIDS, or were living with AIDS themselves. The American described her longing for a husband, and her earnest prayers for God to send the right man into her life. And she mentioned this to one of the African women who had known lots of tragedy in her own life, but just laughed at her and said, "you're expecting God to change your circumstances but need to realize God doesn't change them, He accompanies you through them."

Some places will preach if you give more money you will find happiness, and become healthy. If you pray harder you'll be made well. If you only had more faith your circumstances would improve. While we can wish life was that easy, or that God operated that way, I find these theologies to be hollow. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying miracles can't happen or that we shouldn't pray and expect things to change. But sometimes we need to step back and confront our assumptions, our theology, our understanding of God.

Just briefly when we look at our gospel, we see James and John, asking for positions of prestige and power, unaware of what they're asking for or what it entails. The other disciples get angry, perhaps for these two thinking they're better than the rest of them. But Jesus goes on to point out that greatness, faithfulness, isn't determined by power but by service. Jesus tells them again and again, serve others, love others, especially those who nobody else serves or cares about. This is my goodbye, this is my encouragement. God is far greater and grander than we can possibly imagine. We can see hints of it all around us, even within us. And while we can't fully understand God's nature, we have to do our best to explore and understand what God is asking of us, what we as God's people are called to do. It doesn't mean that things get easier – we aren't promised changes to our circumstances but we are promised God's presence with them. And we, who commit to being the body of Christ must remember that Jesus didn't just die for us He also died with us. Jesus didn't just focus on His personal relationship with God, He also made time for relationships with other people. And I want you to know that God is still with us, through the Spirit. We are bound together through the Holy Spirit, who is mysterious and full of life, driving and guiding the church to do God's will.

I can't help but encourage you to remember that God is greater than we can fathom, but still loves us and is with us. Inasmuch as we come to worship God and learn about God, we're called to go out. We come to learn so that we can put into practice. And I want to encourage you, one more time, that even if you don't have a priest that comes in regularly to serve you communion it won't prevent you from serving others in Christ's name. Amen.