

Sermon– “Greatly Astounded”

Sunday, October 14, 2018

Scripture – Job 23:1-9, 16-17, Mark 10:17-31

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The Book of Job is an ancient and yet, timeless story about integrity and faith. Written probably during the sixth century B.C.E., this book was of great comfort to the Israelites who experienced tremendous loss and suffering during the Babylonian exile. The prologue in chapters 1 and 2 sets the stage for Job’s loss of wealth, health and family, and for the dialogue that follows between Job and his three friends. Job’s friends are grounded in the wisdom tradition which believes human suffering is punishment for sin. They come to accuse him under the cloak of piety and orthodoxy. Job will maintain his integrity only by denying the orthodoxy of his faith tradition. Job will certainly need God (if he is ever able to find God) to vindicate his position. By claiming his innocence in the midst of suffering, Job astounds his friends, rejects the simple, trite religious answers of their faith, and affirms the mystery of the God whose presence he seeks. Today’s reading is Job 23:1-9, 16-17. This is the word of God.

“Today also my complaint is bitter;^[a] God’s^[b] hand is heavy despite my groaning.

³ Oh, that I knew where I might find God, that I might come even to God’s dwelling!

⁴ I would lay my case before God, and fill my mouth with arguments.

⁵ I would learn what God would answer me, and understand what God would say to me.

⁶ Would God contend with me in the greatness of God’s power?

No; but God would give heed to me.

⁷ There an upright person could reason with God,

and I should be acquitted forever by my judge.

⁸ “If I go forward, God is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive God;

⁹ on the left God hides, and I cannot behold God; I turn^[c] to the right, but I cannot see God.

¹⁶ It is God who makes me fainthearted; The Almighty who fills me with fear,

¹⁷ Yet I am not reduced to silence by the darkness or by the mystery which hides God. Amen.

I Choose Love was written by Mark Miller in June of 2015 following the tragic church shooting in Charleston, South Carolina when nine men and women who came to the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church to pray were killed. Dale Rogers, Reverend Trajan McGill, Rev. Hannah Dreitcer and I heard the song during a worship retreat we were attending together at Montreat Conference Center that summer, and Dale brought it home to Westminster. It has been a favorite of our youth, and we are grateful to you, Carolyn Lowe and the Westminster Choir for strengthening our spirits with this meaningful song through the gift of your beautiful voices.

This week’s gospel reading is Mark 10:17-31. We are privy to three conversations as Jesus moves closer to the suffering he will embrace on behalf of humanity. First, is the interchange between Jesus and the rich man, followed by a dialogue between Jesus and the disciples, and concluding with a comment by Peter and a response by Jesus. The rich man comes to Jesus with a question revealing his understanding that simply following the rules, even the finest religious rules, is not sufficient for a relationship with God. His prosperity would be an indicator that he, indeed, was a good man according to wisdom literature as his goodness has been rewarded with material wealth. Sadly, when given a choice to part with his prosperity, he walks away. This is the word of God.

17 As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 18 Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 19 You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.' " 20 He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." 21 Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." 22 When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. 23 Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" 24 And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." 26 They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" 27 Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." 28 Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." 29 Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, 30 who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. 31 But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." Amen.

The title of the sermon: "Greatly Astounded"

The text: They were greatly astounded... Mark 10:26a

Let us pray: O God, from whom we come, to whom we return, and in whom we live and move and have our being, strengthen and sustain us during times of betrayal, loss and suffering and give us the courage when pain comes into our lives to choose love. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

To be astounded, according to *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*, is to be filled with bewilderment or wonder, to be amazed, astonished, surprised, stunned, confounded, shocked. I think it is fair to say that there are times in each of our lives when we are greatly astounded either by our personal circumstances or the news of the world.

We learn from our gospel reading that the disciples were *greatly astounded* at Jesus' teaching about how difficult it is for a person of means to enter into the kingdom of God. Giving up one's wealth, especially in a culture that believes wealth is a reward for goodness, proved to be too difficult for this rich man. His wealth was a part of his identity, a material sign of God's blessing, and rather than share some of it with the poor and enter the kingdom of God, he went away grieving. In order to enter the kingdom of God, according to Christ, one must be willing to give up a part of oneself, whether it's one's wealth, one's parochialism, or one's worldview.

The story of Job is about a good, wealthy man who loses everything he owns along with the people he loves. In the same way that the rich man's wealth kept him from entering the kingdom of God, the orthodox beliefs of Job's three friends keep them from choosing love and entering into their friend's pain to become a healing presence. They were terrified by his loss

and needed to convince themselves that Job's suffering was a result of his sin. They were unable to embrace their shared humanity or to affirm the humbling truth that by the grace of God goes each one of us.

Job was greatly astounded at his friends' lack of compassion and empathy. He found himself in a faith crisis feeling alone and abandoned. He likely found comfort in the lament of Psalm 22, familiar words to us because the gospel records Jesus speaking them on the cross. *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me.* God is difficult to find in the midst of suffering, even for Christ.

Job's story was of great comfort to the Israelites who experienced tremendous loss and suffering during the Babylonian exile. The age-old wisdom that the good are blessed with prosperity and the evil punished with misfortune could no longer be embraced by the exiled Israelites. It was no longer consistent with their experience, which is not unlike Job's experience... and so Job's dilemma, in many ways, was their dilemma.

Job begins his journey toward spiritual healing by risking in asking honest and poignant questions of God and the friends who comfort him by urging him to confess the sin that has brought his suffering upon him.

Job's astonishment and tenacity lead him beyond traditional religious piety to seeing God's face in the midst of his tremendous loss. The suffering that Job endured and the questions he asked broaden his worldview and strengthened his faith. He no longer accepts that suffering and loss are God's punishment. Life is more complicated than this and beyond such simple answers. God is larger than any individual suffering and any one theology.

And so, with Job, even though our questions may never be fully answered—we can find strength in the courage to ask them and in the God who listens to us and who rejoices when we are not *reduced to silence by the darkness or by the mystery which hides God.*

Harold Kushner comments on Job's questions in his book When Bad Things Happen to Good People. Job's friend's first mistake was to think that when Job said, 'Why is God doing this to me?' he was asking a question. In reality, Job's words are a cry of pain and a plea for understanding. Instead of a question mark, the sentence needs an exclamation point. Job needed compassion, the sense that others felt his pain with him, more than he needed theological explanations about God's ways. Job needed friends who would permit him to be angry and to cry out more than he needed friends who would urge him to be an example of patience and piety for others.

Part of the agony of love is that love cannot ensure life will be without pain. All the prayers, all the advice, all the following of rules are no guarantee. Love is a risky business. There is no way to bargain with God about that. The greater evil would be to fear loss too much to risk loving at all. Mary Oliver says it well:

To live in this world you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.

For Job, it is God who has made us as we are, capable of love and attachment, but also susceptible to disease, accidents, violence and betrayal. The wisdom of Job's stance is that it allows him to recognize and seek the presence of God even in the most desolate of experiences. And so even though our questions may never be fully answered—we find strength in the courage to ask them on the journey toward our healing, and we find comfort in the faith that calls us to choose love even in the midst of pain.

This is not acceptance in the sense of resignation, but trust that we can live full, courageous lives, risking in loving and losing because we live and move and have our being in God, the Creator of the ends of the earth, the God whose understanding is unsearchable, and the God who joined us in our humanity and who entered our pain in, Christ Jesus.

Along with Job and the disciples, may we be greatly astounded by the God with whom all things are possible. May we not walk away from the invitation to give up a part of ourselves and so enter the kingdom of God. By the grace of God, may we have the courage in the midst of pain to choose love. So be it. Amen.