

Sermon – Complaints and Kingdoms
Scripture – Job 23:1-9, 16-17, Mark 10:17-31
Sunday, October 11, 2015
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Springfield, Illinois

Our first reading is from the book of Job, chapter 23, verses 1-9 and 16-17. Last week we heard of how Satan, the Accuser, struck Job with disease in order to prove to God how even the most righteous man would curse God under the right circumstances. In the 20 chapters since, Job has lost everything, and has been visited by friends who insist he must have done something to deserve all this. His wife told him to give up and curse God; his friends tell him to confess whatever sins must be at the root of his suffering. Job refuses to do either. Hear now God's holy Word.

1 Then Job answered: 2 "Today also my complaint is bitter; God's 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 the Lord, 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 the Lord 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 the Most High, and I should be acquitted forever by my judge. 8 "If I go forward, you are not there; or backward, I cannot perceive you; 9 on the left you hide, and I cannot behold you; I turn to the right, but I cannot see you. 16 God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me; 17 If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face! Amen.

Our second reading, Mark chapter 10, verses 17-31, finds Jesus traveling once more. He has already foretold his coming suffering and death, and warned his disciples of the hard road waiting for his followers. Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people.

17 As he 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."

This is the Word of the Lord.

Title of the Sermon: “Complaints and Kingdoms”

The text: “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?’” Mark 10:17

Let us pray. Holy God, you come to people in all times and places, offering new life in your presence. Give us open hearts as we hear your Word, that we may follow you as faithful and committed disciples. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Before I start, I want to make something clear: I have no answers. Isn’t that a way to inspire confidence. But I want us all to be on the same page—I don’t have clear, easy, tidy answers. Scripture in general defies such attempts, and our Scripture readings today are particularly defiant. For both readings always strike me as leaving us helpless in the face of them.

The entire book of Job is fairly famous for evoking a feeling of helplessness and confusion—God makes a deal with Satan? To see just how much this good person can take before cursing God? Really? Are you sure? It’s troubling and confusing, and not a useful answer to the heart-breaking and ever present question of unexplainable tragedy.

Less immediately grim, yet just as baffling, is our reading from Mark. This, too, is a historically perplexing passage. A camel through the eye of a needle is perhaps the most vivid image used in the entirety of Scripture, and may be even in Western literature. And it’s been met with a collective *What??*. In fact, scholars have gone to great lengths to find a way to make sense of this passage in their study of it. Some point to a Needle Gate in Jerusalem—surely, they say, that’s what Jesus meant! It’s as hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God as it is for a camel to travel through a small, person-sized gate! Difficult, but doable. And we like this answer. It makes sense. Other scholars respond with a slighter more impossible, yet still more logical solution. The word for *camel* in Aramaic, they point out, is awfully similar to that for *rope*. Surely Jesus said “a rope through the eye of a needle”—still impossible, yet a metaphor an English teacher can get behind—pleasing in its form and logical in its arrangement.

When faced with today’s readings, we want to fix them, in a way, in order to fix our own constant helplessness and confusion in the face of all that is unexplainable in our lives and world. For these are not throwaway passages, but rather are about some of the most profound concerns of being human: Why do bad things happen? What can I do to stop them? This seems like a good moment to remind you again that I have no answers.

So we turn back to Scripture. We hear these questions in a slightly different form in our reading from Mark, for this has always weighed heavily on human hearts. “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” This question may as well ring from every page of Job in the shape of a despairing cry: “Good God—what did I do wrong?” Both versions of this question operate on the assumption of answers, of cause and effect, of action and equivalent consequence—of rules, reward, punishment, logic, clarity, and order. And yet the Book of Job resides in the complete breakdown of that order and that logical system. Job’s defining and only characteristic is righteousness—he is worthy, he is deserving, he is fundamentally good and has made every right choice. But he has lost **everything**.

Everyone looks for answers. His wife suggests God has abandoned him, so he may as well give up and curse God, who didn’t stick to the rules. His friends tell him he **MUST** have done something to

deserve this pain, that he needs to confess his wrongdoing so that God will make it all stop. These responses are familiar to all of us who have been in the midst of unexplainable tragedy. In our helplessness and confusion, we try to make order where there is none, and find systems of logic to explain, for any answer seems better than being lost in the desperate cry of “Why?”

But that is where Job remains. Job, revered for thousands of years for his persistence in integrity and his unshakeable faith in the face of unspeakable tragedy, cries out to God with a bitter complaint. Job cries out in confusion, in terror of his Creator, in distress and pain, and in despair. Job doesn’t lose his faith or turn angrily away from the God who doesn’t play by human rules—Job cries out his questions, his complaints, his anger and bitterness and confusion and helplessness to God. In the face of a world that refuses to make sense and brings only pain, the shape of Job’s faithfulness is his cry of despair.

I don’t have answers. And this hardly feels like an answer—for in the neat and tidy world we want and work so hard to create, faith only ever looks like gratitude and hope and gentle acceptance, not bitter complaints and heart-wrenching cries. But I believe this passage, this response of Job’s, is the heart of the book. And Job’s despair as his faithfulness is not comfortable—but I do find it a comfort. I find it a hard sort of comfort, but a comfort nonetheless that God doesn’t abide by the rules of logic and order that we broken and fallen humans make up—that God is not tameable, or tidy—that life isn’t a cosmic game of brownie points and gold stars and timeouts—that God operates beyond human understandings of logic and control.

And it may not be an answer, but to me it is good news. For in our world we set up our own understandings of who is deserving and who is not. And so often those already hurting—the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, the homeless, the refugee and immigrant—are shifted into the not deserving category. The rich man is righteous, just like Job. He wants to follow God—he has obeyed every commandment and still seeks to learn what more he can do. But what does he ask? “Good Teacher, what must I do to be rewarded?” And Jesus offers the hardest commandment—“Sell all you have, give the money to the poor, and come follow me.”

Jesus isn’t trying to cut this guy down to size—for Jesus looks at him and **loves** him. But I do wonder just how much easier it is to follow the commandments when one has many possessions and is assured of comfortable living. And Satan wondered the same thing about Job. And the man might agree, for he goes away grieving. He came expecting an answer, an achievable action, something that fits within his framework of rewards for good behavior—and yet the answer given seems impossible. And Jesus’s explanation to his disciples is even more impossible—“*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.*”

We have tried to make it make sense, for we want tidy answers, and I think we want those gates to be just a little wider, for we fear we might be carrying too many of our own possessions to fit through. Yet this is the text we have. And I believe this is the image Jesus used. It is mind-bendingly strange—the disciples, we are told, are greatly astounded, right along with us. What could be more impossible? And so we are caught in our human systems of reward and punishment, tidiness and structure and logic, of the deserving and the less so, and we worry for ourselves as we think of our own possessions. We seek ways of explaining this image away, of making it clearer, neater, easier. Like Job’s friends, we chase down tidy answers in the face of our discomfort and confusion and helplessness.

But remember? I have no answers. Job is in the midst of unexplainable, unjustifiable tragedy. There is no denying that. There is no denying that our desire for wealth, our focus on self and consumption and possession weigh us down and keep us from following Christ.

But Jesus looks at us, caught in our need for a system we can understand, one which finds us worthy and deserving, and **loves** us. Jesus gives us an image that is arresting in its oddity, delightful in its absurdity, threatening in its impossibility—And when the disciples echo our own fear that the kingdom might be awfully empty, our despair is our faith, for as we sit in our confusion and helplessness, Jesus loves us again in our desire to seek the kingdom, and tells us that with God there are no impossibilities—not even a camel through the eye of a needle. God is not neat and tidy—God does not make decisions according to who is worthy—God does not smite us or reward us based off an itemized checklist. God loves us, and forgives us, and see! In Christ, God has begun a new thing. God's kingdom makes all things new, whether we are Job, crying out in despair, or the rich man grieving the weight of wealth he can't let go of. God doesn't abide by the rules of logic and order that we broken and fallen humans make up—God is not tameable, or tidy—God operates beyond human understandings. It may not be an answer, but it is good news.

For we set up our own understandings of who is deserving and who is not. And so often those already hurting—the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, the homeless, the refugee and immigrant—are treated as the unworthy. But in our wild and untameable eternal God, there is a great reversal of our understandings. The first shall be last. The last shall be first. Faithfulness can take the form of bitter, helpless cries to God. The poor, the hurting, the ones who cry out in despair will inherit the earth and the abundance of God's realm. The rich will set aside human notions of worth and reward and share their wealth to care for all God's children so that together we all might build God's kingdom.

So even under the weight of our possessions, even in the midst of our crying out, let us be disciples and seek to follow Christ.

For with God all things are possible—even a camel through the eye of the needle.

Thanks be to God!