

Sermon – Voices that Cry Out
Sunday, October 18, 2015
Scripture – Job 38:1-13, Hebrews 5:1-10
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Our first scripture reading is Job 38:1-13. The lectionary continues in the epic story of Job's unjust suffering allowed by God at "the hand of the adversary" (Satan) to test Job's integrity. In Job, Satan is not the enemy of God but a kind of official accuser, a member of the heavenly council. His charge is to point out specific accusations to God. Job, a righteous man, has lost his children in a fire, his entire estate and his health. His body is covered with sores. After twenty-nine chapters of voices that cry out (both Job's and his friends), God finally speaks. May God open our hearts and minds to the hearing and understanding of God's Word.

1 Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: 2 "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? 3 Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. 4 "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. 5 Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? 6 On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone 7 when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? 8 "Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?— 9 when I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, 10 and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, 11 and said, "Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped"? 12 "Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place, 13 so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth, and the wicked be shaken out of it? Amen.

Our second scripture reading is Hebrews 5:1-10. The God who answers Job out of the whirlwind is the God who shared our humanity in Christ Jesus. Like Job, Jesus' loud cries and tears are a part of his journey toward wholeness and reverent submission.

The Book of Hebrews draws imagery from the Jewish ritual life in the temple when describing Jesus as the high priest who offers sacrifices and mediates between God and humanity. While the role of priest has continued in Catholic and Orthodox churches, as a part of the Reformation, Presbyterians emphasize the priesthood of all believers and understand Christ alone as our Mediator. Hear now, God's holy word.

1 Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. 2 He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; 3 and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. 4 And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was. 5 So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"; 6 as he says also in another place, "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek." 7 In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. 8 Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; 9 and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, 10 having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

The title of the sermon: “Voices that Cry Out”

The text: “Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind...” Job 38:1a

Let us pray: O God, from whom we come, to whom we return, and in whom we live and move and have our being, thank you for reminding us that you are God and we are not. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

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 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.

A person of integrity is one who lives in accord with the religious norms of one’s faith and whose character is one of honesty and sincerity. There is congruency, a sense of wholeness, an agreement between the heart and the mind in a person with integrity. Ordinarily it would be unthinkable that a conflict would exist between religious norms and a person’s honesty. However, just such a tension existed within Job, and is implicit in the words his wife speaks to him in chapter one. *Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die!*

In these words to her beloved Job, she acknowledges the unthinkable: a conflict between integrity as honesty and integrity as conformity to religious norms. If Job holds on to integrity in the sense of conformity to religious norms and blesses God as he did before, she senses that he will be committing an act of deceit, a lie! How can one bless a God that allows this to happen? On the other hand, if he holds on to integrity in the sense of honesty, then he must curse God and violate religious norms which forbid cursing. Job hears the words of his wife and perhaps because she touches on the truth of his internal battle, he calls her *a foolish woman* or the literal interpretation, one who *talks like trash*. This dialogue between Job and his wife is wonderfully honest. I can almost hear the ancient Hebrew storytellers elaborating on this interaction as the story is passed from generation to generation.

Job voices yet another question in response to his wife, one that reflects the Hebrew traditional view of life as a whole and God’s hand in all of it. *Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?* It’s a rhetorical question and a generous word. It reveals his faith and trust in Yahweh, and yet, Job’s internal struggle continues as it does for each one of us when life is unfair.

When Job speaks again following seven days of silence in the presence of his three friends who came to console him, his wife’s question has become his own and his voice cries out. He doesn’t curse God but he curses the day he was born. He doesn’t die but he speaks longingly about death. He begins his journey toward spiritual healing by giving voice to 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.

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 did not want them to explain God to him, and Job certainly did not want them to point out where his theology was faulty. 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.

Job's tenacious honesty is a gift to all of us! His persistence and willingness to raise his voice was his greatest moment of integrity. It led him beyond traditional religious piety into the presence of God. When God's voice cries out in the whirlwind, God does not answer Job's questions, neither does God indict Job. Instead, God reminds Job who God is and puts the conversation on an entirely new plane: *"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? ... when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy, where were you?"*

It is God who is the Creator of the universe and God's wisdom and power far exceed anything the human mind can begin to grasp. In the presence of Job's beloved Creator God, Job is speechless, in awe and humbled. Job knows who Job is and to whom he belongs in this holy encounter.

Satan was wrong about Job. His faith was not a bargaining chip with God to get what he wanted. Job loved the life and the family he lost. Part of the agony of love is that it cannot ensure the safety of those we love. All the prayers, all the advice, all the following of rules and superstitious rituals cannot guarantee it. Loving 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, letting go is made possible precisely because all things—both good and bad—ultimately come from God. The suffering that Job persevered and the questions he voiced broadened his worldview and strengthened his faith. He no longer accepted that suffering and loss are God's punishment. Life is more complicated and beyond such simple answers. God is larger than any individual suffering and any one theology. For Job, it is God who has made us as we are, capable of love and attachment, but also susceptible to disease, accidents and violence. The wisdom of Job's stance is that it allows him to recognize 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 insists this is our Father's world.

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 and the God who joined us in our humanity in Christ Jesus, who in the days of his flesh, offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears to the One who had the power to save him. To do so was an act of faith and reverent submission.

May we also have the courage to live with integrity by honoring our voices, even when they cry out. So be it. Amen.