

Sunday, October 15, 2006

Call to Worship (Ps 90:12-17)

**So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.**

**Turn, O God! How long? Have compassion on your servants!**

*From everlasting to everlasting, you are God.*

**Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil.**

*From everlasting to everlasting, you are God.*

**Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children. Let the favor of the Sovereign our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands— O prosper the work of our hands!**

*From everlasting to everlasting, you are God.*

Passing of Peace

Gloria

Hymn      *Open My Eyes That I Might See*

CH 586

Invocation (The Lord's Prayer during Children's Time)

Mark 10:17-31 - 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?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 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.'" He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." 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." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. 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!" 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! 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." They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." 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, 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. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

This morning's Old Testament lesson comes to us from Job 23:1-9, 16-17. You may remember the story of Job – a man prosperous by all accounts. The first chapter says, "*There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. He had seven **thousand** sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants; so that **this man** was the greatest of all the people of the east.*" Then God allows Satan to take away everything – his land, his family, his wealth and his health. This is exacerbated by unsympathetic friends. And what we hear in today's scripture is response. Please listen for the word of God.

Then Job answered: "Today also my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy despite my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling! I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. I would learn what he would answer me, and understand what he would say to me. Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; but he would give heed to me. There an upright person could reason with him, and I should be acquitted forever by my judge. If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him."

God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me; If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!

Offering...

Time With the Children

Hymn      *Come Thou Font of Every Blessing*

CH 16

*Where Are You?*

All week I have been pondering the scripture from last week regarding woman as man's *helpmate* and the role of women (and *Libido*) in a traditional marriage. And then out of nowhere I read - *This just in from MSNBC* from LAWRENCEVILLE, Ga. - The "runaway bride." Have you heard about this? Apparently a bride took off days before her lavish wedding in 2005 and is suing her former fiancé for \$500,000, claiming he defrauded her out of her share of their assets.

Jennifer Wilbanks (the near-bride) is seeking \$250,000 as her share of a home she says John C. Mason (not to be confused with Charles Manson) purchased through the partnership with proceeds from \$500,000 received for selling their story to Regan Media in New York. She also wants \$250,000 in punitive damages for alleged *abuse of the power of attorney* she granted for Mason to handle their financial affairs.

This question about the **role** of women *that had been brewing within me called to mind many things* – not the least of which was – that

there was no “Thumper” in this story. (Pause) Joking aside, there is no happily-ever-after for this woman and man.

It caused me to wonder about the Gospel lesson for this morning and wondered if either the man or the woman (in the news story) might inherit the Kingdom of God.

And then, as my stream of consciousness does, (and this will come as know surprise to those of you who know me) I moved from one thing to another and began to consider the story of Job. (Pause)

The Contemporary Biblical Translation called The Message offers this account of our Old Testament lesson. It says, Job replied: “I’m not letting up—I’m *standing my ground*. My complaint is legitimate. God has no right to treat me like this— **it isn’t fair!** If I knew where on earth to find him, I’d go straight to him. I’d lay my case before him face-to-face, give him all my arguments firsthand. I’d find out exactly what he’s thinking, discover what’s going on in his head. *Do you think he’d dismiss me or bully me?* No, he’d take me seriously. He’d see a *straight-living man* standing before him; my Judge would acquit me for *good of all charges*. “I travel East looking for him—I find no one; then West, but not a trace; I go North, but he’s hidden his tracks; then South, but not even a glimpse. “But he knows where I am and what I’ve done. He can cross-examine me all he wants, and *I’ll pass the test with honors*. I’ve followed him closely, my feet in his footprints, not once swerving from his way. I’ve obeyed every word he’s spoken, *and not just obeyed his advice — I’ve treasured it*. “But he is

singular and sovereign. Who can argue with him? He does what he wants, when he wants to. He'll complete in detail what he's decided about me, and whatever else he determines to do. Is it any wonder that I dread meeting him? *Whenever I think about it*, I get scared all over again. God makes my heart sink! **God Almighty** gives me the shudders! I'm completely in the dark, I can't see my hand in front of my face." (Pause)

Certainly there are times when each of us can't see *the hand in front of our face*. Situations like this are often made worse when we turn to the Bible and hear several voices in Scripture. Sometimes, these different voices are even within the same book of the Bible, as we hear in the speeches given by Job's friends, *who recite for him the conventional theological wisdom that **might be** summed up in three words: Life – is - fair. If you do bad things, bad things will happen to you. (**Conversely**, if good things happen to you, then you must have done something good to deserve them.)* It's a nice system - very neat and logical: **there's payback for sin**, and **reward** for virtue. In Job's case, the punishment is so great, losing everything and all his children and then his health, that his companions assume that whatever he did to offend God must have been *REALLY* bad.

But Job is not alone in disagreeing with his "friends." In fact, if they had indeed been friends, perhaps they would have done better at *active listening* or at being a *compassionate presence*, **just sitting with** Job in his pain and suffering.

No, Job is not alone because we are with Job, aren't we? Don't we watch the innocent suffer and wonder at how just, **how fair** the universe is? *When we see the people we care about* suffer from illness; when we see children violated and killed at the hands of adults; or see strangers dying from hunger or war, don't we ask where God is in all that? How could a loving God allow such tragedy?

And what about the good things that happen to bad people - prospering from those who have gone undetected in their cheating and stealing, so graphically illustrated by the **calamitous** fall of companies whose leaders have left widows and retirees impoverished?

No, Job isn't alone in this story. *We sit with him sometimes* and ask, "Where we can find God in it all?" (Pause)

And then there are different voices not only within a given text, but between books of the Bible as well. One can hardly read today's text, "If I go forward, God is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive God" (23:8), without questioning the adoration in Psalm 90. "*From everlasting to everlasting, you are God.*"

These voices express different moments in the human condition, **times of loss and questioning**, times of utter assurance of God's presence and love. Most of us experience both in our lifetimes, and "faith" becomes *at such moments* a very **different** kind of word than just **right belief** in the correct doctrines. It becomes **trust**, a centering

of ourselves in *The Mysterious On*, whose power and wisdom are so far beyond our own feeble (*but often noble*) attempts to make sense of the universe. Job's friends are like preachers who have no good news and no comforting presence to share, only judgment and a *kind of logic* that violates Job's integrity. Even though Job says that he can't feel God's presence, that he can't find God so *he can ask* why these calamities have befallen him, he still holds to a stubborn kind of faith, a trust that God's is just *even if life is not*. And so (Scared as he maybe) he longs to find God, to stand before God and make his case, like an attorney in a court before a judge. But right then, scraping his sores and surrounded by well-intentioned but *misguided friends*, Job feels that God is far, far away. When things are *really bad*, **it may not be that God has left us** but that *we are blocked by pain* from perceiving the God *from whom we cannot flee*.

Some people see the Bible as a book of answers; others see in it both answers and unanswered questions.

The Book of Job is best read in its entirety, as one passage offers each us only a glimpse into this poetic and powerful reflection on undeserved suffering. But scholars provide an intriguing take on the final verses of today's passage: the NRSV suggests Job is *terminally depressed and despondent*, longing for death and oblivion. But the Hebrew, according to James **Newsome** (Texts for Preaching Year B), "is quite different, for *it expresses Job's continued and hopeful persistence... 'It is **God** who makes me fainthearted, the Almighty who fills me with fear, yet I am not reduced to silence by the darkness*

*or by the mystery which hides him'.*" Rather than resignation, Newsome says, Job embodies "continued faithfulness to his belief in a gracious God and to his belief in his own innocence."

Another well know Theologian and Homletics Professor, Walter Brueggemann has preached a beautiful sermon on Job, saying that Job was like (our friend Thumper – no I mean) Adam in his need for a conversation partner who is adequate to the challenge. "Job seeks a conversation partner who will address him at the point of his anguish. Jobs friends will not address him in his anguish, but will only rebuke him. Job must, however, find a partner who is not too simple, boring, unconvincing. He must find a partner worthy of his life, *elusive enough to interest, hidden enough to attract*, severe enough to detain, awesome enough to encounter. *He must find one* or he be left with only his integrity" ("A Bilingual Life" in *The Threat of Life: Sermons on Pain, Power and Weakness*). And, according to Brueggemann, this integrity is real and important, but "not adequate for the living of his life."

How might we apply these reflections to our lives and to the life we share? Thinking of the desolation at Ground Zero or in Oklahoma City or in Lebanon or Baghdad or Gaza or Pakistan or any number of other disasters, the loss of innocent life in Pennsylvania and Colorado, *and the suffering of those who simply might have been in the wrong place at the wrong time*, do we feel the pain and ashes around us as we sit and wonder why? When the cancer diagnosis is delivered, can we absorb it without losing our trust in God?

In our modern understanding of depression, where is the theology of Job? How do these readings from Job resonate with our "stages of grief"? Is Job angry in this text, or is he bargaining, or is he in denial? When have *you tried to find security in your integrity*, and yet found yourself surrounded by loss anyway? What does that tell us then about our security and our faith? (Pause)

### **Pastoral Prayer**

Let us pray...God of All, you have so fashioned the world that it possesses the potential to repair its imperfections. And, O Eternal One, you have fashioned humankind by endowing us, as your partners - with the creative ability to help the repairing. You gave us the insight *to transform the simple herb* into a healing balm for the body. May we, as your servants, realize our responsibility to transform *the herb of human caring into a healing balm for the aching soul*. Like ourselves, many are in need. We know the inner yearnings for acceptance, for fulfillment, for purpose, for meaning in our lives. May we ***ever come to know*** that as we help others to feel fulfilled, so shall we. Empower us to do your work in this world. As your Spirit heals and sustains them, May we – too – support.... Ann, Zach, Luke, William and all of the Stewart family.

And we give heartfelt thanks for the union of Pam and Liz,  
 The marriage of Darci and Rob; Jennifer and Jamie; and Andrew and  
 Sha-nay,

God of grace, be with these people,  
*and with each one of us* in our seeking and even in our turning away  
 from your presence in our lives.

Open the hearts and minds of the leaders of our land and those  
 abroad.

Enable them to lead with wisdom and compassion,  
 rather than with fear and anger.

Let your truth and justice be visible in our lives today,  
*In order that our church and our nation* may glorify your most Holy  
 name. Amen.

Anthem & then Hymn

*Great is Thy Faithfulness*

CH 86

Benediction

**Let us** *go and meet the world which God loves and for which Christ  
 came.*

**Let us proclaim that God is worthy of our trust** and Christ of our  
 discipleship. Let us live as heirs of Christ in the Kingdom of God **and  
 as the people of God** *in the midst of God's world.* Amen.