

## Proper 24 B

**Job 38:1-7, (34-41)  
Mark 10:35-45**

The week before last we heard of a God who said, in his conversation with Satan concerning Job, “. . . he still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason.” (Job 2:3)

Today we hear something else deeply disturbing about God: that God is more powerful than we, so what he does is right, no matter how wrong it may seem. I've heard Job interpreted that way too many times for comfort. And I assert, with all the conviction, all the force, all the outrage I can muster, that no conception of God, based upon God as raw power, is worthy of the Christian tradition. Ultimately I believe such conceptions of God to be destructive to the people and communities which hold them and ironically corrosive to a true relationship with he whom they purport to honor. There is, in human beings, a tendency to worship power without respect to its aims, its uses and its origins. Even inside the church we have to be careful we don't end up worshipping unlimited, undifferentiated power, under the name of God.

I will give you a hint which might be helpful in telling the difference between worshipping a powerful God and worshipping power as god. God has the capacity to call us to account by asking us to be gentler and more merciful, more patient with the weak, more inclusive of the helpless, than we already are. If one's experience of God never asks one to move toward the gentle, but always toward the successful, the powerful and the impressive, then reassessment is needed. This points to today's gospel.

What James and John are asking for, of course, is top dog places in the Kingdom. The prime ministership and the Secretary of State at a minimum. Jesus tells them that they really don't get it. The kingdom of God is about (and I'm going a bit farther here than the text goes) your identity. It's about what gives you coherence of being in a framework of hope. In John's gospel it says that the kingdom of God is within you. And what's within you is either a serving unity or a fragmenting lunge for power or any one of a number of other things. But the Kingdom is living a life whose coherence arises out of loving and not out of something else. The question is, what, or more particularly who, makes you who you are? If it is caring for other beings that makes you who you are, then you are already knocking at the kingdom's gate, even in this life in your present body.

If it is not caring which is beginning to make you who you are, your participation in the Christian enterprise is probably wasted effort. I would remind you, by the way, that caring needs to be for oneself also, with the caution that any negative judgment one is tempted to engage in regarding one's own status needs to be tempered by at least as much mercy as you would hope to be able to give someone else. I find that among middle class people, raised in perfectionistic homes, this is a problem. So I will say it one more time, in the Christian vision, in moving toward caring and toward mercy, these things apply reflexively, internally, as well as externally. Something we need to keep in mind.

So in today's Old Testament lesson God asks concerning Job's identity, "Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins and I shall question you and you shall declare to me." And then the challenger of Job (God) launches into the famous "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth . . ." passage. Now, my second observation, besides the fact that this is a power play, is, that like many power plays it doesn't deal with the issue. What's the issue that Job wishes to lay before God? "Do I deserve the treatment I'm getting?" That's the issue. Asking Job if he were present when the foundations of the world were laid does not appear to me to address that issue. Unfairness can be applied to both small and great, or, to come closer to the present case, to both knowledgeable and ignorant. Here we seem to have an Old Testament author carried away with his rhetorical skill, which is considerable. But, in being carried away, he has (and this is why some scholars believe this passage to be a later add on.) lost sight of the fact that we have now made God into a setter up of straw men. The question is not God's power, it's not God's wisdom or ability, but, the treatment Job has received. Is it just? The answer, as God has already admitted, is no, it is not. The events that Job experiences are "without cause" in the world of justice.

The rest of The Book of Job recognizes the injustice of the accusation against Job and records his consequent compensation, according to the Law, for an unjust accusation.

Now I suggest that Job is like a number of other books in scripture, a bit too much of a hot potato to handle. When this happens, people change the books, or they ignore the hotter parts of them. Let me give you a few examples. In the Old Testament, The Book of Ecclesiastes implies that God is there, but we really can't know anything about him and the sun shines on just and unjust alike, so what's on here? The author goes on like this for several pages, then, at the very end of the book, there's a scribal addition which says, of making books there is no end and much reading is a weariness to the flesh. What's good is to obey the law and the rest is ignorance. The scribal annotator distances himself from the scepticism expressed in Ecclesiastes.

My favorite example of this tendency to rework is the ending of the Gospel according to Mark. The empty tomb is recounted, and then, in the older and better manuscripts, the gospel simply stops before the resurrected Jesus appears. Now there are two ending of Mark which do have resurrection appearances. The evidence is that these were composed later, because folks were so uncomfortable with a gospel without a resurrection appearance that they decided to put one in. Now they might have gotten away with it, but they, unfortunately, wrote two different additional ending to Mark, a longer one and a shorter one. Some manuscripts have the longer one and some the shorter one. The two endings are not anything like each other. And when you see two endings, you are justified in getting suspicious that someone is playing ducks and drakes with the content. So, which one do we pick, the no resurrection appearances, the short summary, or the longer account? Not every ending can be Mark's original.

Comment: Which one do we have?

I don't know what this lectionary has done because we're not to the end of Mark yet. But we should have the one that stops in midstream and lacks resurrection appearances. It is, without doubt, the best reading. But that The Gospel of Mark should have an empty tomb story but no resurrection appearances was felt to be intolerable and so people did what they usually do when

faced with a concept of God which doesn't mesh with current beliefs: they made something up to make it mesh.

Comment: Which one is in the modern Bible?

Neither, because both the longer and the shorter endings are tacked on to where most text critical scholars believe the gospel actually ends. The older and more accurate Authorized (King James) Versions use the longer ending. Most really good modern Bibles will have the shorter and longer endings as footnotes or in italicized print with an explanation – after all, they, too, are a part of the Christian tradition and illuminating of the faith. There are three major variations in the manuscripts, (1) No resurrection appearance, (2) A quite short and cursory record of resurrection appearances, and (3) A longer set of resurrection appearances, which is a summary of resurrection appearances from other canonical gospels. (In itself, that ought to be enough to make one suspicious – that the earliest gospel's ending would summarize the endings of gospels probably written after it!)

What's going on here is the usual challenge which hits religions. God speaks to us, and we're uncomfortable hearing what's said. In the case of the ending of Mark, I think the point is that the resurrection is not something which happens primarily in the outside world and saves you from the outside. The resurrected Jesus must be found in your own evolving relationship with God. If you don't find the resurrected Jesus in your heart, you will not find him in the outside world. Or, to put it more accurately, if you don't encounter the resurrected Jesus in your own life, in some fashion, having a resurrection story in a gospel won't do it for you. So we, says Mark, are not going to talk about the experience of the resurrected Jesus in the outside world (resurrection story). The gospel is going to stop with emptiness and you who look to Jesus will have to fill that emptiness with your own relation with God in and through Christ. But that's a hard message. We want a savior to save us from things, not to lead us into them, not to make demands on us, not to say, "Your salvation is in our own hands if you seek to love."

A powerful God may save us by allowing us passivity, a loving God can only accept from us a constant attempt at friendship. That's hard work.

In the case of both Job and Ecclesiastes, we struggle with the books, and miss the core meaning because the original message is hard. The original message is that sometimes things are not all right, sometimes they are tragic and God doesn't change it. The test is not whether the tragic circumstances can be changed or not, not whether if we relate to God in the right way he will waive his hands to save us. The challenge is to maintain a loving heart through and in spite of it all. And that's a hard message. It is a hard message that God either cannot or will not prevent the suffering of the innocent.

But if we refuse that knowledge, then there is something which ends up being incomplete about our love. We have not fully chosen Jesus, if we think that, somehow, suffering can be justified. The conflict within Christianity is between love and suffering and death. We chose one, or, in the longest of runs, we chose the other. If we decide to chose love, I think that is all that can be said about it. We don't chose love because it solves problems, because it makes everything all right, because somehow, some way I've never seen in actual history, if we chose

love everything makes sense. To truly chose love means to chose it for its own sake. Love is end, not instrument, but to chose it for the sake of its products is to make of love an instrument, and not an end.

That's the hard message I find in Job. Job has to chose not to break his relation with God. He chooses that relation in spite of all the evidence. Job's justification is not that he understands God or likes God, not that he believes that God is just, not that he believes that God can make everything work out, it's simply that he chooses that relationship and refuses to break the connection. When his wife says, "Curse God and die." Job says no, I will not reject (break connection) with my God. When his friends say, "Abase yourself before God because you must have done something wrong and you need to surrender to overwhelming power." Job says that he won't do that, because it would be lying to his God and that's a betrayal of his relationship. Job says that he must question injustice attributed to God, even when he is the recipient of the injustice. If he does not do so then he betrays his relationship and his God.

And at the bottom of our lives, what do we chose? Love as end or love as instrument? Love in order to . . . or just love? To derive the meaning of our lives from him who loved enough to die for us is to chose love, and not for the sake of any result beyond love itself. Not even for the sake of the resurrection of the body.

That's enough of that. Please stand for the creed.