

JOB'S TROUBLES, GOD'S MINDFULNESS Part II

Rev Dan Stern October 15, 2006 P18B

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

Hymn # 515, O God, My God

From the Old Testament book of Job, chapter 23, verses 1-9 & 16-17:

Job answered, "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! 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! He would give heed to me. There an upright person could reason with him, and I should be acquitted forever before my judge. But as for now, 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!"
(Hymn # 515)

A reading from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 10, verses 23-31:

Jesus 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 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 has any chance at all?" Jesus was blunt. "No chance at all if you think you can pull it off by yourself. Every chance in the world if you let God do it."

Peter tried another angle. "Look, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Mark my words, no one who sacrifices house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children, land - whatever - because of me and the Message will lose out. They'll get it all back, multiplied many times in homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and land - but also in troubles. And then the bonus of eternal life! This is once again the Great Reversal: many who were first will end up last, and the last first."

Last Sunday, we began to look at the book of Job and to give consideration to the reality of undeserved pain and suffering. We'll ponder that mystery a bit further this morning. And given the content of our gospel reading about wealth, you may also recall the story I told of the overly-materialistic corporate executive who, having severed his own arm in a car accident, was more concerned with the loss of his BMW and his Rolex watch than he was with his missing arm. On the other end of the spectrum from that degree of materialism, perhaps you've heard why it took the Buddha forever to vacuum his sofa. Why? Because he didn't have any attachments! Which I guess is just to say that no matter what we have or don't have, whether we're good or not so good, we will likely endure some measure of suffering during the span of our lives! And if we have to endure pain of one kind or another anyway, it may be better to end up with an enlightened consciousness than with a clean sofa.

The best way to make God laugh, I've heard told, is to say, "This is MINE." And God must have laughed a lot over the course of human history, because in our own day, in Jesus' day, and in Job's day alike, people have bought that simplistic notion that all the well-to-do, comfortable, happily gorgeous people DESERVE what they have. And of course, if they must go and die someday, they deserve to pass it all on to their spoiled rotten progeny too! Now Bill Gates Sr. is one wealthy individual who's very much against the repeal of the inheritance tax because he knows that the inheritance tax is one of the best remaining revenue sources we have in our state and nation to assist our poorest citizens. But most who are privileged don't agree with him. They say, "We who have, deserve to keep, or to pass on what we have as we see fit."

And they believe the corollary opposite too, that the POOR, the suffering, the down-and-out are undeserving of anything better. It's easy to subconsciously fall into this way of thinking - partly because the weaknesses and sins of society's disenfranchised are publicly visible, far-more easily scrutinized. Street people, after all, exist right there in the streets in plain sight, in front of God and all of us with our noses in the air driving by them! And that actually pretty much sums up Job's so-called friends' attitude when his life took such a sudden turn for the worst. When they just couldn't avoid his sore-riddled presence any longer, they came to him, but fearing his lack of wellness and hoping it wouldn't spread, they felt they had an obligation to explain the reasons, the theological rationale for his suffering. They wanted to be ever so very helpful in letting him know how he'd failed God! It was as if to give holy justification to all life's wretched inequalities in one fell swoop. In Jesus' day, his own disciples, for the most part, had been similarly brainwashed prior to meeting Jesus. Though poor themselves, before the Spirit of God descended on them, they pretty much bought the line they'd always been fed about the deserving rich and the undeserving poor. The Pharisees had long taught that the well-off had God's blessing, and the miserable had done something horribly wrong in God's sight and must atone. That way of thinking never was a great self-esteem booster for women, foreigners, eunuchs, or lepers.

Society's tendency is, of course, to scapegoat the weak. Meanwhile, we seldom seem to get adequately outraged about the suffering caused by the more blatant masters of deceit and corruption- the names of power-welders Scooter Libby, Ken Lay, Bob Ney and Jack Abramoff come to mind- such as these are the ones who get away with it the longest, who do damage the poor cannot. They have houses they can lock securely, after all, with bars and blinds on the windows, and security cameras aiming outward 24/7. It's pretty much the equivalent of having draw bridges over moats with alligators. And if their corruption does get exposed during their own lifetimes, and of course, we only can name those who do get exposed, still they're prepared with a cadre of yes-men and spin doctors and friends who just happen to be sitting judges. The worst kinds of criminals, in their bubbles of privilege and power, can long shield themselves from scrutiny, accountability, and from the suffering they have caused others. So maybe it's good that we crave the exposure of a good scandal every so often. We can laugh with the likes of progressive talk show radio's Stephenie Miller, who calls the recently-exposed House page scandal la cage a fouly. (In the end, it's not that we take such delight that the high and the mighty fall. Rather, we delight in knowing that the suffering they have caused has been lessened.)

It's always tempting for the proud and the well-to-do to believe that God favors them. But the God of Job and the God of Jesus say otherwise. It is, in fact, the poor and the miserable that God

is most mindful of, not least. It is these for whom God is watching out, "all the time, listening, caring, loving...And waiting to answer."

And yet we must insist on further questioning: why are there so many tragic life stories among the least of these, God's poor, God's ever-so-miserable "favored" ones? In today's section of the book of Job, this very good and ethical man, suddenly destitute, has been driven to the point of suicidal depression. At one moment, we encounter Job still calling out for God to hear his plea, and he's passionately pleading his case before the judge of all, the One in whom Job so doggedly continues to trust, though he hears nothing in reply. He gets no acquittal. And in the next moment, as if at the very moment of breaking, of hitting rock bottom, it is as if a forced confession under torture, and he admits that he is scared to death of God. And I find myself wondering, since Job has so faithfully believed in God's goodness: what is he really afraid of? Is it God's presence, or God's absence? God's power, or God's lack of expressed power? God's word, or God's silence? I think it must be the latter. Job is scared to the point of despair NOT by God's basic character, which is unequivocally caring and good, but rather, by God's seeming slowness in relieving prolonged misery. "My God, my God, why, oh why have you forsaken me?" This is not the cry of one who is terrified by God's wrath, but rather, by God's apparent delay in coming. God will rescue, Job keeps saying, but when? How long, O Lord, how long? Come quickly, lest I, in my misery, die without having tasted joy in your presence once again.

Alas, during our own lifetimes, the mystery of human suffering deepens rather than lessens. It doesn't let up. So again, I must ask the question that is beyond the "why is there suffering?" Question. I must ask, How is it that so many, that anyone at all, overcomes horrible suffering? How is it that so often tragedy becomes, in fact, the impetus for hope and for faith? How can anyone be imprisoned or tortured or exiled, or go off to war, and come back with severed limbs or impaired hearing and mental trauma, and yet in some ways is changed for the better? This is the exception, of course, not the rule. I'm hardly saying that war or imprisonment are good and helpful things. But in spite of these horrors, good does continue to be. How is it? How is it that African-American descendants of slaves are among the most sincerely religious of all peoples on this continent? When BB King sings the blues, when he wails and moans out his and our own troubles, the awfulness of life gets exposed to light, and we actually feel a whole lot better. I suppose at some basic level, all true religion and great music and art are exactly what we need them to be: each a magnificent cathartic antidote to the inevitability of misery and suffering. BB King doesn't smooth things over. Neither does Job. Nor, for sure, does Jesus. And yet, he tells his disciples, "Mark my words, no one who sacrifices house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children, land – whatever - will lose out." It'll all come back to you, and yes, there will still be troubles, but there'll be a whole lot more than that. There'll be the overcoming of troubles in a kind of eternity that is abundant with goodness and joy. It'll all come back to us, it'll be "the Great Reversal: many who were first will end up last, and the last first."

Now I have to confess, I remember liking this verse about the first being last and the last first a whole lot more in my younger years. Hearing it, it always seemed like God was ultimately going to be with me, because I was voluntarily kind of poor, and felt I must have had God on my side as I picked apples for a living and hitchhiked around the country with very little cash on hand. But frankly, life hadn't mellowed much yet, and I exuded a fair amount of youthful self-

righteousness; I was pretty miserable and confused. Now, I'm settled and for the most part, happy. And yes too: I'm better off financially. So I'm no longer sure I WANT that 'great reversal of fortune" in my own personal life. In wider society, yes, in the world of things political, you bet. But total transformation...Of me? Could I bear with that much change? I don't know...Perhaps when I'm old, I will long for that great reversal once again. But meanwhile, with the poet Wendell Barry,

When despair for the world grows in me
and I awake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water,
and the great heron feeds.

I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethoughts of grief.
I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light.
For a time I rest in the grace of the world,
and am free.

Amen.