

Proper 24B, October 18, 2009

Lections: Job 38:1-7; Ps. 104:1-9, 24, 37b; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45

If the truth be told there are probably a lot of things we want in this world, lots of things we would like to be different, even if we are not as bold as James and John asking for the best seats in the Jesus play. They hoped that life with him would change their status, and it will, but not in the patterns they had hoped. Perhaps by now, with Jesus in the gospel of Mark predicting his suffering, death and vindication for the third time, they were frightened by the suffering and death part and went for vindication. Maybe they were afraid. No one likes a lost cause; no one wants to go down with the ship. It is very human to struggle with dreams that don't play out quite the way you expected.

Job's life was frightening. A man who loved God and was prosperous and deeply faithful, counting the blessings of family and health as well, suddenly finds himself in the midst of suffering and loss. In an earlier part of this book of the Bible, he is sitting on a dung heap scratching his boils/itches with a piece of broken pottery. His life has unraveled so much he can't recognize it: his health, his wealth, his family are all gone. He questions God. How can this happen; why do the good suffer; if you are a God who loves us and we are faithful, why do bad things happen? Is God limited in power? Are we paying for our sins? Job's friends haven't been much help and the early part of the story says that the devil bet God he could 'turn' Job away from his faith through suffering. Job has questions and so do we. Suffering is a challenge to faith.

“When William Sloane Coffin was an undergraduate student at Yale, three of his friends were killed in an automobile accident when the driver fell asleep at the wheel. At the funeral Coffin says he was sickened by the piety of the priest who quoted from the book of Job. (these are Job's words) “The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” Coffin was so angry, so outraged that he even considered tripping the priest as he processed down the aisle of the church. As he was preparing to do so, a small voice asked him, ‘what part of the phrase, Coffin, are you objecting to?’ He says that initially he thought it was the second part, the Lord hath taken away. Then suddenly he understood that he was resisting the first part, ‘the Lord gives. He says, “It hit me hard that it was not my world, that at best we were all guests. And ‘the Lord gave’ was a statement against which all the spears of human pride have to be hurled and shattered.”

¹Coffin survived this amazing reframing of his attitudes and became a minister of Christ's church, becoming one of its most famous preachers. His wisdom is distilled in a small book published just before his death; it is entitled *Credo*. Coffin's faith was again tested by suffering and loss; he clung always to God.

God answers Job's questions with more questions and invites Job to look at all of creation. Jesus invites James and John and all disciples into a reconsideration of faith. We are all asked whether we will trust God beyond and through all circumstances. We are given water and a cup and are invited to be grateful for the opportunity to risk a deeper journey. We are often unhappy with the challenges of our lives and the lives of those we care about; we hate suffering. We want better and sometimes think we deserve it.

¹ Feasting on the Word

The passage from Hebrews invites us into the priesthood of Jesus, the priesthood of all believers, those called to live a cruciform life. We are those who stand in the broken places which are opportunities to live from God's perspective and not our own. Christianity is not for sissies; it is an entry into God, a willingness to be one with brokenness and its mending and also to look at our lives from a larger place.

I had been invited to speak at a 2 day seminar yesterday entitled, "Just Say Yes!" I arrived early enough to hear authors and a variety of achievers tell a large group of women that they had the power to claim a full and rich life. This was a weekend of self-help, a time when people are invited to consider their hopes and dreams, to affirm that their life matters; sometimes it - the secret - could be found in a book, being sold right there!. I had a hard time with a life dream including a three car garage, the perfect husband, son and dog; that if I didn't read and follow the 'rules of the universe' beginning with a personal goal said every day, I would not find/attract abundance...I guess the church is responsible for my different perspective.

I was asked to speak to saying yes to creativity and imagination. I showed art work, some done by me, others done by folks in various congregations. I told stories of cruciform lives, those whose honesty in their personal geographies including suffering and sometimes vindication. I presented work about the lives of folks who didn't attract abundance in those terms of possessions and wealth. What I offered was faith in what God has taught me - we need not seek our own security, our own chief chairs. We are friends of God and friends of each other and none of us should have to suffer alone. Our common task is to remain faithful to the One whose name we bear, in confidence and in gratitude for the gift of being guests on the planet. Did I mention that several women of the Well, a diocesan ministry, had been included in the day; I wondered if their life dream was a three car garage.

We have an opportunity to surround our children next week in what they are learning about God when they assume new roles for worship and present the book "And God Created Squash." And in two weeks our bishop John will join us as we surround four people in confirmation. We are not teaching them that following Jesus grants special status, unless it is the status of the beloved. I want them to know they are not alone in the struggle.

Amen+

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