

Pentecost 20B 2009

Proper 24

Texts: Job 38:1-7, 34-41

Psalm 104:1-9, 25, 37c

Hebrews 5:1-10

Mark 10:35-45

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the world?”

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

**Two weeks ago I stood in this pulpit and told you that the Book of Job is very important because it deals with age old questions about God and evil and suffering. It deals with God’s goodness, or perceived lack thereof, and God’s power in and over creation. And it deals with the question all humans ask, regardless of culture, economic status, geography or history. The Book of Job deals with the question of why bad things happen to good people.**

**We are now in the third week of the readings of the Book of Job. The last reading in the cycle will occur next Sunday. For three weeks we have listened to Job and Job’s supposed “friends,” and I use that term loosely.**

**For 38 chapters Job and his friends have gone back and forth about Job’s innocence in the suffering that has been brought upon him. Job has insisted on his innocence, insisted that he has followed God faithfully and loyally. His friends just haven’t been able to believe this. Surely no one would experience all the loss and pain and suffering that Job has had if they had truly been faithful and loyal to God.**

**In last week’s reading Job decides to lay his case before God, to argue with God about what God has allowed. But Job isn’t sure where he can find God. “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...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.” Job is a man with a mission, to find the God he believes has abandoned him and to demand an answer from the one he believes to be responsible for all his suffering.**

**He doesn't curse God, as his wife wants him to or as Satan has predicted he will, but he does demand some answers.**

**In today's reading, Job gets more than he ever could have bargained for. In today's reading the God that Job believed to be absent is found not have been absent, but silent. And there is a world of difference between the two. God has been present and has let the situation unfold before God decides to speak. Job believes God to have abandoned him and what he finds is that God has been there from the beginning.**

**Job demands answers and instead gets God himself. God does answer Job, but not in the way Job expects or most probably wants. God answers Job with questions. From Chapter 38 to the end of the book, God peppers Job with 60 rhetorical questions.**

**“Who are you to speak without knowledge? Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me. Come on! I'm waiting for your answer. What do you know that I do not? Can you do all that I have done?”**

**God asks Job all these questions that Job cannot possibly answer. God doesn't say this nastily as some commentators would like us to believe. And unlike Job's friends, God says this without judgment. God is trying to prove a point to Job, trying to get Job out of his one way of thinking about the situation and to consider other possibilities.**

**God is asking, “Job, do you worship me because if you don't you are afraid something bad will happen? Do you worship me out of fear or out of thanksgiving? Do you worship me to hedge your bets? Or do you love me because I loved you first? Do you love me for what I can give you, or for who I am, and for the mercy I bestow?”**

**If Job worshipped God, loved God, for any other reason than God is God (and the corollary to that is, if God is God, we are not), if Job worshipped God so Job wouldn't know pain or suffering, or if Job worshipped God so that he could reap blessings, than the interactions between God and Job become mere transactions. God's interaction with Job is then based on material objects or on what each can get out of the**

other, a kind of quid pro quo, versus being in relationship with one another.

Job asks “why,” as we all do, and the answer he gets is not to a “why” question but to a “who” question. The actual question “why” is far more important than the answer we seek, but it also may be the wrong question to ask. It is important to ask why. We have a primal human need to do so.

But God doesn’t respond to the why because God responds to something much more important. God responds to what is behind the why and what causes us to ask the why question is a searing pain; a pain that God wants to be in the middle of. That ultimately will make a far bigger difference than any other answer we may want or believe we need to hear.

God’s questions to Job of who created all that is, of who was present before time began and who will be present eternally after it has passed away, of who has cared for creation and the stars and cosmos gives Job a new perspective, a new lens to look at his life with.

“Look at all I have done!” says, God. “Look at how small you are in comparison to all of it, how seemingly inconsequential to all of it you are. But it is with you that I have chosen to have a relationship! It is to humanity that I have shown my glory. It is to you, to humanity I have shown my reality, so that you may claim my reality as your own.”

This is where Job’s and our hope lies. Our reality is not the ultimate reality. Our reality does not dictate our worth before God. Our circumstances do not determine our relationship with God.

Do we really want a world where we are rewarded for being good and punished for being bad? Think about the implications of that for a moment. Do we want to live in a world where we have to continually and forever prove we are worthy to receive the love and blessing of God? We all want to think of ourselves as falling into the “being good” camp, but what if we are found wanting? What if we really don’t measure up?

**Do we really want to live in a world where we have to justify day after day that we deserve the love of the people in our lives?**

**Gerald Sittser is a professor of religion at Whitworth College in California. One day, coming home from a short vacation, a drunk driver hit his van carrying his entire family. In a moment his wife, 4-year-old daughter, and mother were killed. His two other children were seriously injured. The drunk driver's wife, eight months pregnant, was also killed.**

**Professor Sittser wrestled with his rage and powerlessness. He hated God. He could not make sense of why this happened and how he didn't deserve this. And he was right, he didn't deserve this tragedy; no one does. But one day when he was having a particularly difficult argument with God, when he raged to God that he didn't deserve this, he felt, more than heard, a voice inside him say, "No Gerry, you didn't deserve this. But did you deserve to have the wife and daughter and mother that you had, to begin with?"**

**This realization literally stopped him short. If being deserving had anything to do with anything, he wouldn't have had this tragedy in his life, but he also wouldn't have known the grace and love of those he loved and lost, because he didn't deserve those either.**

**Did this realization make everything all better? Of course not. But what it did do was to help him move from his rage and bitterness to a different place, a place where he was able to acknowledge God's presence and love and transcendence. His vision of the world changed, painfully, so very painfully, but it was a deeper and more profound vision of God and God's love for him.**

**If we are really honest with ourselves, I think we would admit that we live and work and love under some of the very same assumptions that Job's friends did. We still really want to believe in earning our blessings, in deserving what we get from God. But God is too merciful to give us what we deserve and too loving to let us continue in the delusion that blessings are anything other than pure gift.**

**When we come to this conclusion we are then able to move from worshipping God out of fear, and start worshipping God from the deep well of thanksgiving.**

**Amen.**