

Sermon Oct 25, 2009

This is not exactly a sermon. At least not by my own definition – but I hope that I *will* invite you into a deep encounter with the Holy in our midst, and if I have done that, then whatever we call it, doesn't really matter.

There are two very powerful texts today – and also, it's Reformation Sunday. I couldn't choose among them and so I will deal briefly with each one – offering them to you like – I don't know – like a platter of mixed hors d'oeuvres instead of one hearty meal. I hope you will be nourished.

The first reading is from Job: It's chapter 42: 1-6 and 10-17, recounting the restoration of Job's fortunes. The readings for last Sunday included Job as well, chapter 38 where God responds to Job's complaint. Because of our special service last week, though, I didn't use it. That was quite a sacrifice – this is simply *wonderful* material and I'm sorry we didn't get a chance to go into it deeply

As a book, Job is a poem. It comes from the Wisdom tradition of scripture that we've been discussing all this season. Job's basic question is – **why do the innocent suffer. Why is there suffering in the world.** Why indeed.

The poem is set up this way:

Job, it says, is a righteous man...to whom a series of horrible things happens. Just when we think it's over - something else happens to him....he suffers bodily illness and pain, the loss of his children, his income....and it goes on.

And the abiding question is *why*....and not only that, how will Job deal with it – he's always been a believer in God, will this make him turn away?

His friends come to him, offering all the standard responses that people do, to make some sense of pointless suffering.

You must have done something for which you're being punished, they say. No, Job says. No. First, I haven't done anything – second, this is not the God I know. A God who would punish beloved children in this horrible way? NO.

Then it must be a lesson for you, they try. God must be doing this to teach you something and some day you'll understand.

NO says Job I simply don't buy that. And if God would kill children to teach the parents a lesson – is this the kind of God I'd want to follow?
NO NO NO.

Curse God says his wife – curse God. Turn away. What good has following God been to you?

Again, from Job, a resolute, shake of the head. A head broken, in pain, covered with sores, but still shaking “no” “no I will not curse God. I WILL continue to pray, even though my prayers be wails and questions and angry shaking of my fist in God’s face...”

And so....

In chapter 23 we hear his prayer, which isn’t really a prayer in some ways because by the time he can bring himself to pray, God has been silent so long all Job can say is “Oh that I knew where I might find God – If I knew where God has gone I’d lay my case – ask for some answers – but I don’t even know where to look”

And again the basic, heart wrenching question, that comes from some place deep inside where it seems to rip the throat on the way out, coming out bloody and with pain – WHY?????

I love this book because it offers no slick answers. The answer the book seems to give is – we don’t know why. We don’t know. Sometimes God seems silent. Faithful people sit in silence when they need God to speak, more often than we know. Is this a sign that we are faithless? Not at all. I don’t know why – but this is the way of it. And sometimes all we can do is sit in silence. **And we are created to sit with one another in that silence.**

The reading for today is the final chapter, which has to me the sense of having been added later by someone who couldn’t stand the silence. Job waits, and eventually everything turns out. If this were a screen play only Disney would buy it. Personally, I think the book stands on its own without the happy ending but – nevertheless there it is.

The key question for today is WHAT KIND OF GOD DO WE WORSHIP? WHO IS GOD ANYWAY?

Is God a being who pulls strings on humans, like marionettes, making us do things against our will, testing how far we can be stretched....saying “I wonder what Bev would do if I did THIS to her?” Is God like that?

When my friend Lois was dying, she was on life support, we were told she was brain dead, and were waiting to find out what was involved in taking away the support....someone came into the room and prayed with us. Essentially she said “God, you can heal Lois if you want to”

ARE WE TO CONCLUDE THAT GOD DID NOT WANT TO???????

God, who COULD save us from the horrible things, COULD take away the disease, COULD stop the bullet in mid air, but chooses not to?

Is that our idea of God? Many, many people are operating with that idea somewhere deep inside, and it doesn’t come out until something horrible happens...they don’t realize it, but there they are, praying “God make it stop, take it away” and when it doesn’t happen, they are left trying to rationalize why. God COULD have but...chose not to.

I offer now the reading from Mark – where there is in fact a physical healing but something even more astounding.

Mark 10: 46-52

Like the ending of Job, I think this one could have stopped at the conversation between Jesus and Bartimaeus. **That** was the real miracle....someone who has been sitting on the sidelines physically as well as spiritually, someone dismissed by the community, told to be quiet, don't bother people, blamed for his own infirmity, who had become invisible to them because he was just always there, begging...they had learned – what? They had learned *not to see him*.

And then along comes Jesus. This man is SEEN – really seen – by Jesus, as a person worthy of his time and energy and someone worthy of not just taking what people will give but able to say what it is **he** wants and needs...that's huge. That is world-creating! When Jesus sees him in that way – as a person of dignity and worth, then the community's eyes are opened in a new way and Bartimaeus is seen by them in that way too.

And Jesus, who does that, is the man in whom we see the clearest image of God. THIS IS WHAT GOD IS LIKE. Not a sadistic puppeteer, but one who sits with us in the silence and on the margins, calling us and others into honesty and dignity and personhood in the midst of an imperfect world. That's the miracle. That's what God is like.

(Derrick sings)

To mark Reformation Sunday, it's really important to say that this is NOT about holding up Protestantism over against Roman Catholicism. God's church in every age, and in every denomination, is always in need of reform. The reformation is a continuing movement of the Spirit.

However, I do want to mark the historical 16th century reformers today by saying that the reformers held up and honoured a particular experience of God. God, who is immediate. God, who is available to you and me without anyone else having to intercede. A church structure that is not set in stone, and in which the people have a genuine voice. An open Bible, freely speaking to anyone who reads it, in the language they understand best. God, who is deeply and intimately involved in human living, in church and in the world. God, whose saving Spirit calls us into, not away from, the ordinariness of every day living.

Today let's thank God for those through history whose passion for God brought us to this moment and have given us a tremendous heritage. And let's not take that for granted, and let's pass that on to our children so that some day they'll pass it on too. Let's be open to those on the margins, whether they, like Job, are sitting in silence asking why.....

Or whether they, like Bartimaeus, are yelling out their need

Let's be open to them in the name of the God who sees us into authentic living

And perhaps those voices, the silence and the yelling

Are calls for a new reformation –

May God bless you as you think about these things
And let's sing one of the great, triumphalist, but great, songs of the reformation – words
by Martin Luther – God, the One who stands with us against all odds....

Hymn #262