

## *For God's Sake*

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost,  
October 4, 2009,  
Jill R. Russell

Texts: Job 1.1 , 2.1-10;  
Psalm 26;  
Hebrews 1.1-4, 2.5-12 ;  
Mark 10.2-16

“Those who listen to (the voice of wisdom) will be secure and will live at ease without dread of disaster<sup>1</sup>.” This is the concluding statement to the first chapter of the book of Proverbs. Proverbs along with Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, and Job make up what’s called the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. On the face of it, this equation from Proverbs is compelling. It lines up with a lot of the influences within our own culture; ideas about hard work that pays off and that in the end righteousness is always rewarded. All you have to do is listen to wisdom and you will be secure and live at ease and be free from fear and dread.

This is a great example of how Proverbs is grounded in the tradition of Deuteronomy. This retribution theology (as it is sometimes called) claims that righteousness is rewarded and evil is punished. Within this wisdom literature of the Old Testament, the book of Job rises up with some troubling questions in the face of that rather simplistic equation. I was at my 20<sup>th</sup> high school reunion last night and one of my classmates has family serving as missionaries in Indonesia. In the time they have served they have lived through an earthquake, a bombing, and now two tsunamis. They love their lives there and the people with whom they live but I imagine this promise about security and ease and freedom from disaster just doesn’t ring true. As Jobs’ friends wrestle with him in his suffering around such questions, they will be the voice of the tradition. They will try to make sense of his trials within the neat and tidy theology of retribution. If bad things have happened to you then you must have sinned somewhere, they will say.

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<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 1.33

Job's friends are a little like the man Gordon told us about last week who told a grieving widow if she had more faith her prayers for her husband's healing would have been answered. He may have been able to touch back to the tradition and quote a verse from the book of James in making such a heartless statement but he clearly did not understand the center of James' theology as Gordon explained it to us last week. Getting clear about the context from which a passage comes is critically important if we are to hear the Word of God that is present for us through it.

The prologue to the book of Job is a case in point. I was greatly helped this week in some reading that brought to light some of the context of this book of wisdom we will be reading from the lectionary through the month of October. Here are a few of those insights to keep in mind when approaching this text for today<sup>2</sup>. First, dialogue in the Old Testament is often used as a poetic device to introduce some key theological themes. It's not always a transcription of an actual conversation that transpired but an engaging way to highlight important theological truths that need to be addressed. Secondly, the Israelites would be familiar in a way that we are not with the religion of Mesopotamia. One of the traditions of that religion is that on the New Year the gods would get together in a council to determine the fates for the year to come. In a similar scene in the prologue of Job, God is holding court. One of the figures in the court of God is this one called the satan or the accuser. Don't hear this as the devil as we often think of him. This is not evil incarnate. This is not one who opposes God. In fact, he works for God as a kind of devil's advocate in the council of God. All of this is a way saying that the book of Job is not meant to be read as a historical account – or even a memoir – it is a story designed to probe deep theological and existential questions about the nature of God and the nature of human being.

While a lot of the dialogue between Job and his friends gets at the question of why bad things happen to good people as Rabbi Kushner will frame the question centuries later, the prologue to Job raises a slightly different

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<sup>2</sup> All of these observations are based on the commentary of J. Gerald Janzen, *Job Interpretation Series* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985).

question for us. The accuser raises a very profound question in the divine council: what is at the heart of human devotion to God? Is Job's integrity and piety (his worship of God) merely a response to God's protection and blessing in his life? Is it possible for us to have the kind of maturity and freedom as human beings that allow us to relate to God out of something more foundational than self interest?<sup>3</sup>

Bernard of Clairvaux was a powerful religious force in the middle ages. Even Calvin and Luther admired his writings. He was a mystic whose primary interest was the soul's experience of divine love<sup>4</sup>. He identified the developmental stages (if you will) that starts with what he calls the love of dependence, gratitude, and expectation. It's similar to the way a small child learns to love their parent upon whom they are completely dependent. Over time in the course of loving God for your **own** sake (loving God in order to receive the things you need from God for your life) you begin to discover an appreciation and love for God for **God's** own sake.<sup>5</sup> It's like the young adult who discovers that their parent is an interesting human being whom they actually respect and appreciate apart from the fact that they have given them life and paid their bills.

When that kind of love for God takes hold then your sense of faith can remain rock solid even during times of suffering and seasons of intense questioning. What happens for Job through the remaining chapters of the book is that he begins to ask some demanding questions of God. But in the course of that questioning it isn't his faith that unravels. It is the theology he inherited about the nature of God and the ways of the world that unravels. And it needs to be unraveled. It needs to be pulled apart, looked at, and put back together in another way.

When I listen to Jesus interacting with the religious people of his day, that seems to be his agenda as well. He seeks to unravel their inherited theology – all the ways they have come to think about God and the ways of the world. He does it in order to reconnect people to the ground of their faith -

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<sup>3</sup> Janzen, pg. 39

<sup>4</sup> Walker, Williston, Richard A. Norris, David W. Lotz, and Robert T. Handy, *A History of the Christian Church*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985), pg. 295.

<sup>5</sup> Janzen, pg. 40.

to that place of trust in God that lies underneath all our attempts to justify ourselves. The Pharisees try to trap Jesus with this legalistic question about divorce. They inquire into whether there are any legitimate reasons for divorce. And there are some. In a broken world relationships sometimes need to end. What Jesus wants to talk about instead is the purpose and foundation of marriage; not what is allowable in a broken world but what is possible in the realm of God.

The disciples are quick to notice that when Jesus talks about what is possible in the realm of God, his standard is too high. In fact it is impossible to achieve. And that is the point. It isn't about what we can achieve. That is precisely what Jesus is seeking to unravel in the Pharisees question: our relationship with God is not grounded in our ability to justify ourselves. By the way, have you ever noticed that when you play that game – you have to lower the bar of expectation in order to meet it? (Jesus says to the Pharisees that is because of your hard-heartedness that Moses gave you that law!)

Now children, I know this sermon has been a bit over your head up until now. But I'd like to ask you to listen to this next part. Because Jesus says that we have some things to learn from you. If we enter into relationship with God with the kind of open-hearted trust and love that little children raised by loving parents are uniquely able to offer – if we are able to open our hearts and expect to be loved – to give and to receive in that way that children do – then having this lofty ideal isn't threatening as much as it is inspiring and motivating. It becomes a direction for us to point our lives toward. It becomes a marvelous adventure as we seek to live toward it even if sometimes we fail.

Jesus stands before us now as the host of this table – a table that reaches around the world. He invites people from every land, nation, tribe, and race. He invites us to come and enjoy the feast. He invites us to come as we are: ....with our questions....with our gratitude....in our suffering....in our failures....in our triumphs...to come as we are to receive what God will give us here....and then to go in the firm and certain knowledge that we belong to God. Come for all things are now ready!