

“The Other Way”

Job 38 & Mark 10

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Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson –

The Book of Job is quite a story – and a pretty long story too – but in the lectionary through this Fall we’re given just 4 snippets from the story of Job, so there’s a lot to fill in along the way – and better yet I recommend you read the whole story for yourself – it’s an interesting read! Today is the 3rd of the 4 snippets – a couple weeks ago we heard the beginning of the story, with Job as a righteous man who, after an agreement between God and Satan, is struck with great affliction; last week we heard a lament from Job in the midst of his suffering – feeling the absence of God. Now today we will hear from God; and then next week the resolution at the end of the story. One of the crucial things that has happened in Job’s story that the lectionary does not include, is that before we finally hear from God in what we read today, there have been 4 friends of Job trying to explain what has been happening to Job – so after a lot of people speaking for God, and a lot of silence from God, finally in chapter 38 we hear from God...

Our 8th-9th graders here at Hope Church are part of the GIFT class that I lead – this morning they’re actually on a field trip to the Quaker Meeting in Grand Rapids. It’s a 2-year cycle for GIFT Class with different topics and trips each year, but one thing that we do every year is to begin the Fall by talking about images of God. We talk about images for God that we already have in each of us – and then we explore new images of God for those youths to consider, and hopefully find some images that are meaningful for them in a new way. We look at a list with some images that are quite

traditional: rock; light; shepherd...and some that are quite funky: breath of the cosmos; dreamer of dreams; womb of all; ...and then we share together which images connect with us or not. It seems to me that doing that is a good way to start the year with those youths – images of God bring new ways to expand our understanding of God and our faith in God – and it’s always interesting to see what images these young people connect with. But I can tell you that over the years, I cannot remember anyone ever saying this about his/her view of God: “unknowable”. No one has ever said “other” about God... “completely, totally, utterly other than me”. No one has ever said “unfathomable” or “incomprehensible”...and I suppose those last 2 probably aren’t words typically tripping of the tongues of 8th-9th graders! – but “unknowable”, and “other” could be – and I hope you get the idea. In thinking about this I realize that our images of God are something we ponder and share in order to bring us closer to God, and/or God closer to us – and that’s good. But what we find in the book of Job today is something entirely different – we encounter the realm of the “other” about God – about the “unknowable” nature of God far beyond our comprehension. I’ve preached lots of sermons about knowing God – not so much about not knowing God – about the “other-ness” of God.

So let’s look at how we get to this point in Job – where we hear God speaking about how we do not know God – or to know that we don’t know God...or something like that! And to do that I would like to give you a whirlwind tour of the book of Job...

* the story begins with Job, who we are told is a righteous man; God tells Satan that Job will remain righteous no matter what – Satan disagrees; so

Satan is permitted to bring a multitude of calamities into Job's life; Job remains righteous, but he is upset with God for what has happened.

* 3 friends come to Job in his suffering, to give him advice...

* ELIPHAZ is friend #1- he says "REPENT!"- you've done something wrong, Job – that's why you're suffering: God is punishing you. Admit your sin - ask God for forgiveness- then God will make this all go away.

* BILDAD is friend #2- he says, if you really are good in this life, then things will work out - things will go your way in the end. Just do better, Job, and then God will have everything go well for you.

* ZOPHAR is friend #3- he says, be thankful, Job- be grateful that you have to go through all of this, because it is really God's way of showing love to you. You will be a better person for having gone through this- look at this as an opportunity for growth, Job.

Three friends of Job, all speaking for God in some way – and then comes Elihu, a 4th acquaintance of Job – and Elihu says that all of Job's friends are wrong – and Elihu is right about that! And then Elihu goes on to speak of the “other-ness” of God: ‘God is great and we do not know God,’ he says. Elihu speaks of the power of God in creation and over all people and all things. Elihu gets a lot of things right, it seems – except that Elihu says God is so great and unknowable that Job is presumptuous and misguided to think that God will answer Job...but then God answers Job!

So at the end of this whirlwind tour comes the whirlwind from which God speaks...and it is an intimidating word that is given from God:

Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? ³Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. ⁴“Where

were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

God does sound a lot like what Elihu says –the vast creative power of God at work in all things; but here God even speaks even more extensively and almost exclusively about creation – it’s fascinating....God’s answer to Job is to consider the inscrutable complexity and abundance and power of creatures and creation: God as the source and sustainer, the shaper and caretaker of the universe – that’s what God has to say after all Job has been through. No explanations – no empathy – certainly no apology...but a declaration on how God’s power and presence is so completely other than who Job is...how Job cannot possibly know the full dimensions of the God of the universe.

What are we to make of that? Well – that’s a good question. Part of it is simply the THAT itself – we, with Job, are given to consider this image of who God is – this vast, other, beyond-our-full-knowing truth about God – there is much to know of God in it as God’s power and creative activity is expressed, but it is also meant to point beyond our knowing to a God beyond our full grasp, and certainly beyond our limits and our control. And there is something in that truth that is revealed to give Job perspective in his circumstances – I am not saying it is easy or palatable perspective – but it is a truth to receive.

And there are some other things about this too – part of what is going on here is that God does NOT affirm what the 3 friends of Job have said – their neat and tidy solutions of sin and punishment; of good rewarded; of suffering vindicated. We could guess by God’s silence that it is implied that God does not approve of these, but by the end of Job it is made clear that God has

indeed rejected these answers – and so there is something revealed here by God about God: that God does not and will not be fit into such simplistic religious efforts – God and life and faith are not to be reduced to such standardized formulas. Veiled as it may be, there is grace for Job in that.

And there is something also in the reality of an answer given itself – God confounds the certainty of Elihu too, who says that the God beyond our knowing is beyond us altogether. The mystery, the irony, the paradox, and dare we say the grace, of what happens here is that the God of the universe beyond all knowing does answer this lone person Job – the God who says that Job cannot comprehend all of God’s ways IS in relationship with Job; the God who is beyond – who is other – is present.

That’s something to hold onto – but I was thinking how different this all is than the passage Jes Kast-Keat preached on last week from Hebrews, as Jes preached so meaningfully on Christ understanding and embracing all aspects of our humanity, which calls us to go to God boldly, intimately, expectant of receiving God’s mercy and grace. That very important truth about and image of God being known to us and us to God so fully in Jesus Christ is something we do focus on more often than this idea of the other-ness of God – the God beyond knowing; and that imbalance in emphasis seems understandable and perhaps even good. But something we also do with those two truths in tension with each other is that we put them instead in competition with each other – perhaps deciding that the revelation we are given in Jesus Christ supercedes or replaces what we hear from and wrestle with in Job; we might see it as an Old Testament God and a New Testament God – out with the old and in with the new.

I don't think that's a helpful or faithful thing to do...and it struck me that as we hear first this passage from Job and then the story in the gospel of Mark today, that what happens between Jesus and his disciples is an antidote to what would be a harmful effort to put those Old and New Testament truths at odds. See what you think....here's another whirlwind story summary:

brothers James and John come to Jesus asking for a favor (first they try the old trick of asking Jesus to say yes before Jesus knows what the request is) – they want to be the top two by Jesus' side for now and eternity – his right and left hand men. Jesus says you can't handle what you are asking – they say they can – Jesus says what you're asking isn't my decision! The other disciples hear about James and John's request and they all get mad...so Jesus gathers the Twelve and says... 'the way of the world is power over, power over, power over...that is not your way – your power is to serve, serve, serve...because that is my way – I am the one with the greatest power, and I came to serve...'

We can only fully comprehend the full meaning, the full power of that statement when we comprehend that this is the same God who we encounter in Job. Here is the God of the universe, of all creation, the God whose ways are so “other” than us, who comes to us...made known to us in Jesus Christ. It is the God of unfathomable power who uses that power to serve, to save, to redeem, to give life – who shows that is what true power is. And so in Jesus Christ we are not just given an image and truth of God that brings us so close to God – although it does – we are also encountered again by the other-ness of God because that is NOT how power plays out in our world, and so often not how power is seen and expressed by us and through us.

What happens here between the disciples and Jesus - it isn't the first time – in the gospel of Mark this is the 3rd time already when issues of power and prestige, of authority over or service to, of how to measure greatness, come up. Again and again Jesus has to, wants to, have the disciples see the true power of serving, the stunning power of a life given to be life-giving. And, just like in Job, I think, it points us to, reminds us of the other-ness of God in Jesus Christ –we see how the ways our world has fallen into are so different than the ways of God's life-giving power. We are confronted at the same time today with the awe of the God of the universe whose power to hold all things is beyond our comprehension and with the God of the universe whose power in the flesh of Jesus Christ is a giving, a serving we cannot fully fathom. A God so other than us - but our God.

As we walk through the universe this week – the God of creation is speaking to us of God's unsearchable power. As we walk through our lives with others this week – the God of creation is speaking to us in Christ of God's infinite giving - not to be served, but to serve. If we believe we know either of those fully, we deceive ourselves – but in this world and life we know the ways of death too well, so we turn, are turned, to this other God, this other way – and in doing so, we turn to the way of life. AMEN