

Shouting into the Whirlwind

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St. David's Episcopal Church, Wayne, PA
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Job 38:1-7, 34-41; Mark 10:35-45

Sometimes I stand here, and my task is to remind all of us that the culture of Biblical times was so different from our present day, that even though our Scripture has already been translated into English, we have also to translate our cultural understanding so that the word from God will touch us in our present circumstance. But maybe not today. Today's scripture might come from the *New York Times*.

Our first reading is from Job, part of the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible. It teaches us that bad things happen to good people, and that people who have faith in God try to figure out *why*. From the beginning, we humans have wanted to know the mind of God—we have wanted Wisdom.

As Job's story begins, God and Satan are having a conversation about good and evil. Satan tries to convince God that the only reason people believe is because God is always blessing them. God gives them rich full lives, and so of course they believe in and worship God.

God counters that people believe because we have it in us to believe and to do what is good. As proof, God says to Satan, "*Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil (2:3a).*"

Satan and God disagree about human nature, so God tells Satan to go ahead and try to get Job to turn aside from worshipping God and pursuing the good. Do whatever you want except kill him. God is convinced that Job will be faithful.

And so Job is, although he certainly does suffer at Satan's hands. His family is destroyed; his wealth is plundered; he ends up covered with boils sitting on a dung heap. And he wants to know why. That is where today's reading begins.

The Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:

"Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

Gird up your loins like a man,

I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

I cannot be the only one here today who reads a newspaper or scrolls social media or watches the old-fashioned network news. The world feels like we are in

an uncontrollable whirlwind. And in its wake, there is death and destruction. Elections! Hurricanes! Wars! I walked in here this morning feeling like Job on his dung heap.

And God says, *"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.*

In soaring poetry, the voice of God recorded in the book of *Job* reminds us of the intricate planning of creation—of the divine love that holds us even in the most violent of whirlwinds. We have only 14 verses of it today—but it goes on for several chapters. It is God who set our planet spinning in its course. God is the creator, redeemer, and sanctifier of our human lives. Even though it is a fable set thousands of years ago, *Job* doesn't need a whole lot of cultural translation. God is God, and we are not. You can sit on a dung heap if you want, but the cultural and natural storms will continue to rage, and God will not leave us alone.

In our Gospel portion this morning, *James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to Jesus* and asked him for seats in glory. And it made the ten other disciples furious. There they were, the best friends of Jesus, in the midst of the whirlwind—the coming Passion of Jesus. Jesus is on his way to the Cross. He has begun to teach them that what is coming is not going to be easy. *"Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?"* Jesus has not yet offered the disciples the cup of Passover wine that assures them of his eternal presence with them, and with us. Earlier, they heard Jesus say that offering a cup of water in his name would bring an eternal reward. Now he is telling them that the cup that will be offered to him will bring death.

What's coming will be so awful that it seems like the disciples are going to fly apart. Today's portion of the Good News of Jesus needs no cultural translation, either. The world is falling apart around them, and the disciples have fallen into fighting amongst themselves. Feel familiar?

Jesus offers them, and us, a better way. *[W]hoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.*

Last weekend, with lots of you, I celebrated the ordination to the priesthood of Emily Given, until just last week, St. David's pastoral care associate, now Rector of the Church of the Messiah in Gwynedd. I love the pageantry and the colors and the processions and the music of the church! And on Saturday last, I even got to indulge in my delight in bells and incense. St. David's was well-represented at the service: organist, acolytes, thurifer, banner bearer, ribbon-weaver and readers were all parishioners or staff members. I was dressed up in

my church finery and got to sit between two wonderful colleagues whom I haven't seen in 20 years. Indeed, one of my favorite parts of a diocesan celebration like an ordination is the opportunity to see so many deacons and priests and even the bishop all in one place: the church hierarchy all dressed in their best and sitting in the best seats.

We in the Episcopal Church like our hierarchy. Hierarchy is like a triangle: the people are at the base, and the deacons are above them, translating the needs of the people to the church, and then come the priests, tasked with the holy work, and finally, at the top sits the bishop, holding the authority, "closest to God's glory?"

All too often, that is how we church people, whatever our level, think of the hierarchy: a bottom-heavy triangle, with increasingly less sweaty work as you rise toward the point. As I describe it, I am reminded of another triangle: Job's dung heap. It kind of makes you wonder why we like it so much, but you know, the clothes are really fine, and the seats are quite comfortable.

Today's Gospel shows what Jesus thinks of hierarchy. We humans care where we get to sit. We pay attention to who sits closest to the pointy end of the triangle. But following Jesus is not about sitting in the comfy seats. Following Jesus is not about grand processions and fancy clothes.

But that's okay! James and John are certain that they will be faithful to Jesus no matter what comes. All this buddy-buddy annoys the other disciples, who begin to argue. And finally, Jesus breaks in—in a way that reminds us of God speaking out of the whirlwind.

... whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.

This is the Wisdom of God: that the way to greatness is through service.

I wonder how much we realize that all of our lives can be lives of service? I have a friend who is the rector of a church in Brooklyn. Steve has been in two elections for bishop and came in second both times. I am disappointed on his behalf, and on behalf of the whole church, because I think he would make a great bishop. I also think that he would look good in all of those pretty robes that a bishop gets to wear, and that he would sit tall in the fancy seat that a bishop gets to sit in.

But Steve has a wiser view of things. Here is what he had to say after one of those elections:

The past few months have only deepened my wonder in this mysterious vocation that, for some reason, I get to be part of. I'm a Christian and a priest because it's my way of dedicating my life to being a channel for the Good. I hope to keep using the gift of the priesthood to cultivate love in a cruel world, to help drive back the evils of hatred and greed that are consuming our species, and to fight against the spiritual terror inflicted on God's children just because of who they are or where they're from.

(Steven Paulikas, Facebook Post on October 20, 2018)

My friend understands that following Jesus gives him the opportunity to get up off the dung heap and respond to the voice in the great whirlwind. I think that whether you are sitting pretty toward the top of a hierarchy or whether the dung heap seems like a more apt description of your location, we who follow Jesus can get up and shout into the cultural storm:

I follow Jesus because it is my way of being a channel for what is good.

I follow Jesus to cultivate love in a cruel world.

I follow Jesus to help drive back the evils of hatred and greed.

I follow Jesus to fight against the spiritual terror inflicted on God's children just because of who they are or where they are from.

The Good News today is that Jesus is not just talking to bishops, or priests, or deacons—he is talking to all of us on our own personal dung heaps: *whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.*"