

“October is Jōb Month” Pentecost 19 (B) – October 3, 2021

Introduction by Tim Hall;

RCL: Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Psalm 26; Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16

Today is the Sunday closest to the Feast of St. Francis, and would typically be the Sunday that we would hold a blessing of the animals service. But this year we're moving Francis' feast celebration to next Sunday, when we'll have a mobile blessing at three locations in our community. What fun that should be!

Since we are moving the animal blessing, we are also not doing the special readings that we would typically have for that festival day: the final days of the creation story from Genesis when God brought forth creatures of every kind, seeing that it was good, and the making of human kind in God's image.

And then we read Psalm 104 which recounts a glorious creation filled with mountains and valleys, springs and flowing waters, birds and trees, animals of every kind, the Sun and the moon and the stars. The Psalm ends with this verse:

*O LORD, how manifold are your works!
in wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.*

And then there is the Gospel reading from Luke chapter 12, when Jesus tells his disciples not to worry about their lives, for just as God cares for the birds and the flowers, so much more will he care for them!

These are really nice readings for preaching! But, alas, with our animal blessing moved to next week, we're faced with the lectionary we have this morning, the one appointed for Proper 22, Year B. And there are some tough ones here.

This is what the Rev. Joseph Pagano says in the introduction to his “Sermons that Work” homily for today: “Today may be a Sunday when the preacher and the congregation are of one heart and one mind: the preacher doesn't want to deliver a sermon on divorce and the congregation doesn't want to hear a sermon on divorce.” He then goes on to write a long and thoughtful sermon on just that, saying that this is a difficult subject but one that should not be avoided. And it's important to consider what Jesus is saying and what else the Bible says about divorce in the context of our faith and current times. If you, or someone you know, are struggling with this issue, I commend this sermon to you.

The reading from the Book of Job is equally challenging, with Job caught in the middle of an argument between God and Satan, an incredible story in which a blameless and upright man experiences suffering for no reason.

So the easiest route is to preach on the Epistle (although there is really nothing easy about preaching, at least not for me). Our reading from Hebrews paints a picture of Jesus Christ in the fullness of both his divinity and his humanity.

But since the month of October includes readings from Job for this and the next three weeks, I thought I would try to pull together a homily on this perplexing book, since there must be a reason for giving it that much attention in our Lectionary.

We all know that Job was living the good life and then, for no apparent reason to him, was brought low and subjected to great suffering. This book begins the third section of the Old Testament known as the Poetical Books, which includes the Wisdom writings. Job has a narrative prologue and epilogue, between which are 39 chapters of verse composed of dialogue between Job and his friend as they try to surmise the reason for his suffering and between Job and God. The theme of the book as thought today to be “why do the innocent suffer?”

You’ll note that we read the first verse in chapter 1 and then skipped all the way to chapter 2. Let me fill you in on what’s missing from our reading this morning. I was curious about what songs had been written about Job, as I couldn’t find any specific references in our hymns for today. But I did find an interesting assortment of songs from different genres that deal with the Job story in different ways. Here’s the beginning of one from the 1970’s group, Seatrain that fills in the missing verses...

[play song]

Yes, Job had it all. And then everything he had and loved was taken from him, except his wife. After tearing his robe and shaving his head, he falls to the ground and worshipped God saying, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”

And while God feels that Job has proved himself to be ever faithful and to shun evil, even in the face of all this loss, Satan wants more. He wants to inflict the man himself. And God allows it with the caveat that he spare his life. Of course I found this interesting for if Job was allowed to die, his suffering would end and so would the test of his faith. As our reading ends this morning, although his wife

urges him to “Curse God and die”, Job tells her, “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?”

The book goes on with three cycles of theological and philosophical dialogue between Job and his three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. Next Elihu enters thinking he can settle the discussion, but more back and forth ensue. Finally, Job concludes that he and his family are blameless and he accuses God of acting unjustly and challenges God to prove to Job what he has done wrong to deserve this punishment.

God does not answer the charge or the question, but instead reminds Job that he is the Lord our God, and says to Job, “I will question you, and you shall declare to me!” As recounted in Education for Ministry materials: “Job (and we) are not God’s equal. The human creature stands before God the Creator. In a soaring restatement of the Creation Faith, God challenges Job’s pretensions to wisdom and understanding. The grand mystery of creation is paraded before Job and reveals the incomprehensibility of the works of God.”

Job recants his questioning and reaffirms his faith, “I have heard of you by the hearing of my ear, but now my eye sees you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.” And finally, happy ending, the fortunes of Job are fully restored.

[cowboy muppet song]

This is all well and good for Job, but where does it leave the multitude of innocents who continue to suffer? Indeed, suffering is a part of life. This is what Job tells us and what so much of the Bible teaches. As Hebrews says, even Jesus in his humanity is the model for movement from suffering to glory and honor. God descended in the form of Christ to experience life in human form, and through his suffering and death we are saved.

I see so many people whose circumstances are far worse than mine. And yet they continue to affirm their faith. They are an inspiration. They know, in their hearts, that the final reward is waiting for them. African Americans kept and grew their faith through enslavement, Jim Crow, and racial injustice, even to today. They kept God in their hearts. They are an inspiration. I pray that the Underwood family is keeping God in their hearts as they suffer the loss of their beloved family member, Mike. And I pray that we would all keep God in our hearts, keep the faith, help others who are suffering, and keep our eyes on the final prize, glory with God in the highest. And now a final song... *[Hey Job]*.