

Tim Homily – 21 Oct 2018 (22 Pent B, Proper 24)

Job 38:1-7, (34-41); Psalm 104:1-9, 25, 37b; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45

### **Attention**

Let us pray... “May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.”

Do you remember when you were younger and the idea of riding in the front seat with your mom or dad driving or with one of your friends on what promised to be a really cool outing really got your blood flowing. You’d jostle and race with your brother or sister to be the first to spot the car and shout “SHOTGUN” so that you’d win the privilege of sitting on the right hand of the driver as your journey got underway? Right? We like to be up front, don’t we? We have a clear view of everything that’s going on, the cars coming and going, the interesting sights along the way, control of the radio!

In preparing this homily I discovered that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had spoken on this very passage in a sermon entitled, “The Drum Major Instinct”. Preaching at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, on February 4<sup>th</sup> 1968, just two months before being horribly assassinated, Dr. King began, “Now very quickly, we would automatically condemn James and John, and we would say they were selfish. Why would they make such a selfish request? But before we condemn them too quickly, let us look calmly and honestly at ourselves, and we will discover that we too have those same basic desires for recognition, for importance.

“That same desire for attention, that same desire to be first. And there is deep down within all of us an instinct. It’s a kind of drum major instinct—a desire to be out front, a desire to lead the parade, a desire to be first. And it is something that runs the whole gamut of life.”

Going on, he said, “before we condemn them, let us see that we all have the drum major instinct. We all want to be important, to surpass others, to achieve distinction, to lead the parade.

And you know, we begin early to ask life to put us first. Our first cry as a baby was a bid for attention. And all through childhood the drum major impulse or instinct is a major obsession. Children ask life to grant them first place. They are a little bundle of ego. And they have innately the drum major impulse or the drum major instinct.”

Back to Dr. King later. But first, I’ve been spending some extended time with my granddaughters in Milwaukee for the last couple of months. Sort of like the sons of Zebedee, Kerime, 5, and Azra, 3, the daughters of Yorulmaz (my daughter’s married name) seem to be constantly vying for attention, to be the first, or at least not to be left out. If I’m sitting peacefully reading with one and the other discovers it, forget the calm! All of a sudden the one is being crowded out by the other and often I’m caught in the middle of this mighty struggle for attention. Don’t get me wrong. It’s not like this all the time. And I do appreciate the affection

and attention... to a certain degree. Remember a couple of weeks ago when Jesus told his disciples to let the little children come unto him? It can be wonderful... But not when they're jockeying for position!

Well the sons of Zebedee must have felt some of that same excitement as they trod the road to Jerusalem with their master and teacher. It couldn't have been more than a day or two since Jesus had told the disciples that it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, and that many who are first will be last and the last will be first. But here are James and John, right up there with Peter when it comes to teaching us how not to behave, forgetting yet again what Jesus has been trying to teach them and muscling their way to the front of the twelve to shout "SHOTGUN". "We want to be up front with you!" "Let us share in your Glory!!"

When Eve took the fruit from the tree and when Adam took the fruit from Eve and they both ate; they believed the serpent that this would make them more like God, able to share in his Glory... but instead things fell apart. And God looked at Adam and Eve with great sadness and said, "You will never, ever know what you have done."

We see it over and over... what began with Adam and Eve keeps showing up in the Bible. Time and time again, God's people play out a personal little Garden of Eden in which they discover their all too common capacity for doing things that tear God's creation apart. And God kept on weeping and shaking his head and telling the people, "You have no idea what you have done."

And again in this morning's Gospel reading... no matter how hard Jesus tried to explain that to follow him meant following the way of the cross, which was used daily by the Romans to carry out their harsh rule with gruesome punishment and death, somebody didn't get it. Somebody's personal little Garden of Eden came into play and they began to look after only themselves and their needs and interests and pleasures and desires. This time it is the sons of Zebedee, who totally missed the message of servanthood and instead sought to establish themselves in positions of power and privilege. And God in Christ shook his head sadly, saying, "You have no idea what you are asking, do you?"

To continue with the earlier analogy, he might have reminded them that riding "shotgun" was also tantamount to sitting in the "suicide seat". Would it help to tell them yet again that riding shotgun with Jesus meant being handed over to incredible suffering and death? Did they understand that? Or did they somehow believe that they would be whisked up to Heaven like Elijah, in a chariot of fire, or go like Enoch, "who walked with God and then was no more", or even attain glory like the much-revered Melchizedek. By the way, that's all I'll say about Melchizedek this morning, since I discovered this is actually the second time this year we've read this same passage from Hebrews and I preached on it last March. You can find that homily on our website.

Continuing, is that what the disciples believed, that it would be an easy and glorious walk, even when they were witness to the terrible suffering of their times, of the masses that followed Jesus, pressing in on him, to find relief from the pain life throws at them and all of us?

Job was a human that knew suffering. We have been reading from the Book of Job for the last three weeks and, I must say, I've always had a hard time with this story. And so I took this as an opportunity to dive further into this extended parable. It is dramatic, profound, and disturbing, a literary masterpiece in which the central subject is human suffering and the question, "why is there suffering in the world" is debated in detailed Socratic dialogue.

As the tale begins, Job is living the good life, blessed with many children, sheep, camels, oxen, donkeys, and servants. And then calamity befalls him. He loses everything... first the Sabeans fall upon his oxen and donkeys, carrying them off and killing his servants who were tending them. Then a fire consumes his sheep and the servants tending them. Next, the Chaldeans rustle all his cattle and kill more servants. Finally, a mighty wind blows down the house in which all his sons and daughters are gathered, killing them all. And yet, even in his misery, Job fell on the ground and worshiped 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."

Ultimately, all that Job has is his life and his health. And then even that is taken away as he is afflicted with "loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head." And now all he can do is sit among the ashes, scraping himself with a potsherd, cursing the day he was born and praying for the end to come.

Enter Job's three friends, his comforters, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, who believe that God is testing Job's faith and character and try, in the next 35 chapters, to convince him of this and help him discover what evil and sin he has done to deserve this downfall. Job does not accept that he has done anything to merit this intolerable suffering and remains steadfast in his arguments to the contrary. It is Job who is testing God, calling God to account for the agony of human suffering, for undeserved suffering.

We pick up the story this morning, after multiple discourses between Job and his comforters, at chapter 38, wherein God speaks to Job for the very first time. This is the longest speech by God in the whole of the Old Testament. If we were expecting sensitivity and overwhelming compassion, we will be disappointed. In what sounds like extremely harsh tones, God accuses Job of being without knowledge. As if to expose Job's smallness, God charges him with questions that reveal God unfathomable greatness. What begins this morning with questions like "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" goes on for the next three chapters with incredible, poetic insights into the created world.

What do these three chapters tell us about God? For one thing, they bring to the fore what we need to know, namely, that God's understanding, wisdom and power are far above what we

can comprehend. God is mystery and no amount of doctrine can be full and complete in its expression of the Holy. St. Augustine said, 'If you understand it, then it is not God.'

The second thing is that, though God is at times silent in our life, if not seemingly absent, the point of the legend of Job is that God was with Job in his suffering, and heard every word, every expression, of honesty, disgust and fury. God was with Job in his suffering, though Job did not realize it at the time.

Spoiler Alert! Next week we wrap up our reading of Job, but I'm going to jump ahead and reveal the ending right now. So cover your ears and close your eyes if you want to be surprised next Sunday. ... Job realizes God's greatness and his own humanity, sees God, and repents for ever having doubted him. God is angered with Job's comforters for not having spoken of Him what was right, demanding their atonement. And God restores Job's fortunes after he prays for his friends.

The issues raised by the legend of Job are as pertinent today as they have been for the whole of human history. Why is there suffering? Where is God when we suffer? Is God all powerful and, if so, why does a loving God allow intolerable suffering?

In the story, there is no possibility that the suffering Job is to endure is in any sense a punishment sent by God for wrongs he has committed. Job's suffering has to be without meaning in order for the story to have meaning. There is no simple answer to the question of why there is suffering in the world. Just look at our brothers and sisters in South Carolina, gunned down during a prayer meeting in their church. Were they being punished for wrongs committed? Never. It was just evil imposing itself on them. And their brothers and sisters overcame this suffering through an act of incredible forgiveness.

Rationally, no one would ever wish to endure suffering, or see others suffer. Yet, paradoxically, many people grow and mature through the experience of suffering, either that of others or their own. Often it is through our caring and compassion of those who suffer that we most experience our fuller humanity. Often our darkest moments make us stronger human beings.

In Jesus, we do not see an all-powerful God who intervenes dramatically in human life and suffering. Jesus is captured, questioned, tortured and killed by the Roman authorities. The revelation that we see in Jesus' death is that through the physical, emotional and spiritual agony and suffering of Jesus, God is present. More than that, we see that God suffers in our human suffering. One with us, God suffers with us. God in Christ suffers in all suffering until all suffering shall end.

Okay. So back to our disciples, James and John, who, by the way had never read Hebrews, but had read Job. They probably still had a belief in part of their minds that the Messiah would come as they originally imagined, not as the sacrifice that Jesus was trying to teach them. After they ask to sit with him in glory he tells them, "you don't know what you are asking." And he charges them with tough questions, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized

with the baptism with which I am baptized?" to which they reply, "We are able!" And again he reminds them all that whoever wishes to be great must be a servant.

Which brings me back to Dr. King's sermon, which, by the way, will be posted on our website. Paraphrasing Jesus he said, "You don't have to give up the drum major instinct. It's a good instinct if you use it right. (Yes) It's a good instinct if you don't distort it and pervert it. Don't give it up. Keep feeling the need for being important. Keep feeling the need for being first. But I want you to be first in love. (Amen) I want you to be first in moral excellence. I want you to be first in generosity. That is what I want you to do."

And he transformed the situation by giving a new definition of greatness. And you know how he said it? He said, "Now brethren, I can't give you greatness. And really, I can't make you first." This is what Jesus said to James and John. "You must earn it. True greatness comes not by favoritism, but by fitness. And the right hand and the left are not mine to give, they belong to those who are prepared." (Amen)

And so Jesus gave us a new norm of greatness. If you want to be important—wonderful. If you want to be recognized—wonderful. If you want to be great—wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. (Amen) That's a new definition of greatness."

Can we do it? Can we be the good servants Christ implores us to be? Can we endure suffering and still love God? I hope and pray that you can and that I can. Just like Adam and Eve, and James and John, and millions of others, we have a deep, deep need for a voice from outside ourselves who will neither condone nor condemn; but will rather love us and amend our lives. And we meet that voice, that God, in Jesus, in the one who, "in the days of his flesh . . . offered up supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission . . . he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him." (Hebrews 5:7-9)

~ Amen