

A MOUTH FULL OF ARGUMENT

Mark 10:35-45 Job 23:1-17

October 18, 2009 J. S. O'Neill

Mark 10:35-45 James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." ³⁶ And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" ³⁷ And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." ³⁸ But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" ³⁹ They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; ⁴⁰ but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." ⁴¹ When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. ⁴² So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ⁴³ But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Job 23:1-17 Then Job answered: ² "Today also my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy despite my groaning. ³ Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling! ⁴ I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. ⁵ I would learn what he would answer me, and understand what he would say to me. ⁶ Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; but he would give heed to me. ⁷ There an upright person could reason with him, and I should be acquitted forever by my judge. ⁸ "If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; ⁹ on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him. ¹⁰ But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold. ¹¹ My foot has held fast to his steps; I have kept his way and have not turned aside. ¹² I have not departed from the commandment of his lips; I have treasured in¹ my bosom the words of his mouth. ¹³ But he stands alone and who can dissuade him? What he desires, that he does. ¹⁴ For he will complete what he appoints for me; and many such things are in his mind. ¹⁵ Therefore I am terrified at his presence; when I consider, I am in dread of him. ¹⁶ God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me; ¹⁷ If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!

This past week, while reflecting on the book of Job, a memory of Christine (a member of my congregation in Peoria) popped into my head. I hadn't thought about her in years, but Job's afflictions brought her to mind. Christine was a lovely lady of about forty when I knew her. She had suffered a rotten marriage and a bitter divorce and had finally healed and gained some peace in her life, part of which was meeting Charlie, a true soul-mate for her, and someone that finally fulfilled for her the trust that relationships could be loving and nurturing and mutual. And it was about two years

into this happy marriage that she was diagnosed with brain cancer and given six months to live. Conversations with her about her suffering, her sense of outrage and unfairness, her profound sense of loss, and the sense of meaninglessness that began to once again infect her thought were depressing and bitter. At the root of her anguish was the persistent question “why is this happening to me?” Of course, none of us who cared for her could give any satisfactory answer to this. “Why?” questions around matters of suffering and death come with the territory of being human and they are obdurately unanswerable.

Whenever I read the Bible, I am struck by how profoundly the characters of the Old Testament – Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah – or prominent figures of the New – Jesus, the disciples, Paul – never lived in the world that you and I live in. Yes, it’s the same planet earth that we walk but, of course, none of the folks in the Bible thought of the earth as a planet within a community of planets in a small solar system among billions of solar systems in an infinite universe. And yes, we share the same bodily existence as those ancients, eating and breathing, working and procreating, but these basic similarities break apart in strange ways around the particulars. We are not desert nomads such as Abraham who counted wealth in terms of sheep and goats, servants, slaves, and concubines, nor do we understand assuring the security of our life and property in terms of tribal obligations. We don’t live in a theocracy where national life and religious life mash into a single identity. We are not subjected to the rule of a foreign power as in Jesus’ time, where the lives of all save a tiny privileged minority were discardable and lifespan was measured in short, blunt decades. Nor do we hold a world view where reality is populated by evil spirits and demons mete out the consequences of sin. We do not live under such social and economic oppression that we long for a catastrophic intervention by God to overturn our enemies and replace their brutality with a kingdom of equity and justice. Looking back two thousand years ago to the time of Jesus and his disciples, or as much as thirty-eight hundred years ago to the times of Abraham, the Bible reflects understandings of life’s purposes, the nature of God, the organization of society and family, and the nature of reality itself in so many ways different from our assumptions of today.

And, yet, while scripture is historically rooted in another time, there is a quality of timelessness to it. Its stories still inform and shape us in dynamic ways as we ponder the mysteries of existence, the brokenness as well as the nobility of life, and the connections and disconnections between God and humanity. For the Christian the most familiar territory of scripture is probably the gospels, and within them likely only a few stories, and secondarily Christians know a psalm or two and some stories about Moses and David from Sunday School days.

An Old Testament book that I imagine failed to make most Sunday school curricula is the drama of Job. In our search for meaning, in our groping for God, it is an important omission. The book is best understood, I believe, as a theatre piece, a play performed on the stage of the imagination where the characters, the set, and the dialogue are written to pose questions within the shallow limits of human understanding such as the nature of human life, the meaning of our suffering, and the ineffable mystery of God. It is not history or biography. It is a theological drama that attempts to look at life’s dilemmas from a rational, not superstitious, perspective, yet within the commitments of faith.

In most of the Bible's stories faith is represented as radical trust or desperate hope. So, too, is it presented In Job, but with an important added element. In Job faith is surely a matter of trust, but so too is it a matter of rational investigation, of questioning, and of the presumption of the right to interrogate God. In Job faith itself is subjected to doubt, is brought to trial, and though it is found wanting, it is also found to be the only human posture possible before God. The easy answers and glib assurances of a shallow, unreflective faith are explicitly rejected. Likewise rejected are the mechanical connections between faith and reward, righteousness and blessing, and sinfulness and punishment. Job methodically, determinedly, and thoughtfully holds up faith to examination and asks, "To what avail is faith?"

For the story of Job to do this – to make faith a legitimate subject of thought and reflection mixed in with doubt and ambiguity – is to suddenly make the biblical world much more like our own. Though written six hundred years or so before Jesus, the story of Job is perhaps the most modern text in the Bible. To call Job modern is to acknowledge that we, like him, wrestle mightily with the problem of suffering to the extent that still, in our scientific sophistication, we know not what to do with it or how to think about it. Though our scientific knowledge of reality so far exceeds what the ancients knew and it is as though we live in a different world, we still have at least one foot planted in the realm of mystery. In our worldview disease is no longer attributed to demons but understood as arising from an array of sources, from viruses to genetic miscoding; nonetheless, we pray for healing. We no longer believe that hurricanes or earthquakes or what insurance policies felicitously refer to as "acts of God" have anything to do with God's direct action beyond the basic functioning of natural processes and not God's punishment upon sinful people; yet, when threatened by them, we pray for divine deliverance.

Job, through no fault or consequence of his own, loses everything he loves and values. He is personally afflicted with disease, his children are destroyed, his property taken. He is reduced to nothing. Yet, he does not waver in his trust in God. As impressive as his losses are and as durable as is his trust in God in spite of this, the primary characteristic of Job is his insistence, seen in the scripture passage we read responsively, that God can be held accountable for what has happened. Throughout his ordeals, Job insists that if only he were granted an opportunity to present his case before God, if only God were properly informed as to the real situation, God could be persuaded as to the injustice of Job's situation and life, property, and peace would be restored. In both respects, Job stands in for us moderns. We, too, raise our questions. We, too, in terms of our own time, challenge the way this universe is being run. We see and experience suffering that is undeserved. We, too, know that innocence is in pain, justice is under persistent assault, goodness is in a constant state of tension with evil, and even in the best of times what is good is not pure but alloyed with baser stuff. Ambiguity and ambivalence characterize the way life unfolds, and we look for someone to blame short of finding someone to explain why it all has to be this way. And when we can't find one another to blame, we blame God.

The fundamental theme of Job in my understanding is not why do good people suffer, but why doesn't God answer our questions. Or, to put it another way, do people of faith have special privileges to God's power and grace? Job is a modern

man in the way he exercises his faith. Being a man of faith, he believes that he should have God's attention when he wants it. Being a good man, he believes that God should favor him for it. Being a man, he believes that his human consciousness – the only self-aware consciousness on earth -- should be able to address God, reason with God, and legitimately expect an understandable response.

James and John live five hundred years later than the time the story of Job was written, but they live in the same conceptual world. They think in terms of divine interventions, cosmic battles, and kingdoms of power and privilege. These two disciples of Jesus approach him with a request. They want special privileges when Jesus' revolution is complete and his throne established in heaven. They seem to have no embarrassment about asking this. It never occurs to them to question this reality, nor to wonder whether their hubris and self-absorption might be resented by their disciple colleagues. Nor does their request strike them as contrary to all that Jesus has been teaching them throughout Mark's gospel – about the first being last and the last first, about being a servant and a slave of all, and that his destiny was not kingship in any conventionally pompous and regal way the world knows of. James and John remain opaque to this news. Jesus talks about going to his death, and the disciples can only think about power and prestige.

Jesus' response takes no notice of their vaunted pride. Instead, he challenges them at the point of suffering. They do not understand the implications of their request, he says. Are they ready to shoulder the responsibilities of faithfulness? Are they able to remain faithful through adversity, suffering, and death?

The book of Job is mentioned by name only once in the New Testament. "You have heard of the endurance of Job..." the letter of James says, and here in Mark's gospel the matter of the disciples' endurance is raised by Jesus. But as to the reward James and John request, he does not grant it, saying that it is not his to give. He also is saying that that's not the point. In Job the notion of a mechanical connection between faithfulness and reward is turned on its head. Job is faithful and he suffers for it. In the gospels, Jesus is presented as the very hero of faithfulness and obedience, and yet his suffering is complete and total.

In the story of Job four friends show up to give him comfort in his afflictions. For the most part it is cold comfort at least three of them give, for they insist that suffering follows sinfulness. Throughout, Job protests his innocence, and in today's reading from Job we hear his plea. His mouth is full of argument, he says, if God would only give heed to him.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, just before he is arrested, tried, and crucified, Jesus prays for deliverance. The Gospel of Luke recounts the prayer: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.... [Luke 22:42, 44]

In our suffering we pray for answers. Some of our prayers seek deliverance, from catastrophe, from illness, from death. Some of our prayers may be angry, some may be prideful and self-righteous, but all of them express hope and trust. All of them seek to practice the presence of God; each of them seeks the connection our faith assures us is possible and fruitful. None of them controls external outcomes, and none of them – as the story of Job shows – has the right or the power to expect God

to meet us on our own terms, and none of them – as the story of Jesus shows – has the power to force outcomes according to righteousness and goodness.

I think again of my friend Christine. She did, indeed, die within about six months. We prayed for her and with her; the whole congregation and that vast congregation of friends that she and Charlie had all prayed for her, and she felt the support of those prayers. And perhaps the best evidence of that was the day that I visited her, about three months before her death, when she said she realized she had been asking the wrong question. The wrong question was “why?” The right question, she decided, was, “Now that this has happened to me, how am I going to live?” She had concluded that “why?” was getting her nowhere; only “how” would move her along a faithful pathway toward grace, blessing, and peace.

We live and pray, struggle among ourselves and struggle with God, wonder at the world and its beauties and tribulations, work and play at those responsibilities and opportunities given to us, and strive to live in faithfulness throughout. These are our tasks. We will question; that is who we are. We will contend with God; that, too, is who we are. And in our quarrels with the world, and with God, we will reach the answer that Job reached, that regardless how great our store of knowledge has become, it remains as a speck of dust in the vastness of mystery. And in our sufferings we will perhaps gain the answer Jesus gained and, indeed, own for ourselves the answer he gave, that the purpose and reward of living the faithful life is simply that – to live faithfully. It is its own value, its own reward, and the only path to abundant life itself, the life of servanthood and peace.