

Sermon for 10 October 2021 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Psalm 22:1-15; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

***“Trouble is near.”***

When one thinks of how the scriptures got written, then preserved, then selected, then translated, sometimes over and over through hundreds and even thousands of years, it becomes clear how foolish people are who say they don't reflect much about life. An amazing preservation has occurred ...

Today's words from the Book of Job stare us in the face with feelings our society does its best to ignore, as our suicide rates climb higher and higher to show. All sorts of people experience Job's range of emotions.

Psalm 22 sits squarely on the seat people of many nationalities suffer daily, and again, all too often they reflect what people in our city, and our country, experience, despite our efforts in church, and government, school systems, and yes, families deny them and think about other things.

All this is to say...

Trouble is near; and because it is, it gets talked about in the Bible; and because we claim the Bible speaks God's truth directly to us believers, we hear it today.

Our liturgy is merciful, and mixes such hard words with beautiful poetry and lovely melodies, as well as a chance to say kind words to one another, and to hear, as well, strong examples of good news and solid encouragement, as the dignified Letter to the Hebrews offers.

Then, with all this background, we get down to kingdom business with the Gospel lesson. Today's reading from Mark centers on something we can't dodge, as serious religious people. Jesus says it's harder for church people to get into heaven than it would be for a camel to fit through the eye of a needle. He tells a serious-minded, thoughtful inquirer to sell off everything and come and follow him in his wandering, dangerous life. Mark doesn't edit out

the exchange between Jesus and our classic fall-guy, now known as St. Peter, who asks, "What about us good guys?" The word stands right there: "If you play it straight, and God is merciful, you'll be well-fixed in the end..." Of course we know the end hasn't come yet, as far as either Mark or the rest of us have seen. We get encouragement, yes ... but only a "lick and a promise," as my grandmother used to say ... only a rain-check we haven't seen cashed, except in the Spirit we glimpse here in Jesus' risen body, from

time to time, as we behave ourselves and act with the Spirit of Jesus. Where have you felt Jesus this week? (Time for reflection)

Trouble is near. I didn't know we'd have a police officer among us today, to honor and bless, and talk straight to and say a little bit about our worries to, from our experience, as well as what we hear in the news. Police work is far more dangerous than it was when it started out, basically in Victorian England. I've read the description of its purpose at its founding. The aim of having a police force is not to have anybody in jail.

What a long way we've come from there! We've always had jails, as we can see from that historic tower still standing just east of the expressway downtown; but the fact we as a nation have four or five times as many people in jail, percentage-wise, as any other nation, is our big shame and charge. And we and the police are here today to work and pray and hope and change, because this is big trouble.

We can go off in many directions from here about these scriptures. I've found that the psalms, for example, do a tremendous job to heal and help me in the daily ups and downs of my life and what's in the news... I'll stop here for a moment and ask you what scripture does for you in a world and a time when trouble is so near. (Pause for comments)

Does Job help you when you want to complain to God? Does Jesus put it to you when he says we Americans, and yes, we church people, are among the rich of the earth, and that makes heaven a big jump for us? Does it comfort you to hear it will all work out in the end ... or are you still worried about many things, like Jesus' friend Martha?

What about Hebrews? I know we don't find that writer very personable ... too formal, much of it ... but it does make a strong point when he says Jesus, up there on his throne @ the right hand of God, is there specifically because he experienced what we do? That qualifies him.

All right, Bethesda brothers and sisters and friends. We're heading for trouble. We know it in our hearts. The next few years are as scary to look at as anything I've seen in my lifetime .... They look more dangerous here in Baltimore, and in America, than I can see a way through. I've been telling you I'm tremendously excited that we're facing so many hard things so openly ... there's so much promise when you work together, honestly, on important hang-ups .... I still feel that way; but my Lord, how dark the way looks in many directions!

That's why I'm grateful for scriptures that spell out the agenda as pointedly as these today. It helps to be told what we know, and to hear it all together. God help us to pray about it, and God help us to trust the ways we're sent to

manage, and improve, and survive, and love one another, across all divides, through every storm, and into the impossible sunlight that we are promised, through Jesus Christ.

Amen.