

Sermon for 13 October 2024 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Psalter: (*Psalm 22: 1-15/Insert, alternate Leader, People*);

Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

Sermon

What are we doing here, listening to Job speak so bitterly and despairingly against God?

What is the psalm expressing for us? “My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?” Who said that in the New Testament?

Once again, church is “telling it like it is.”

It’s pretty hard for folks to say church doesn’t talk about hard stuff, although plenty do just that.

I remember one afternoon in seminary, I was reading Rudolph Bultman, a Bible scholar who is so brutal and so hard to see as a person of faith, and I just thought, “That’s his way. He doesn’t rule my outlook,” and just went on with the theme, whatever it was, about the Bible and truth.

I did give up on church later on, for about two decades, but it was because of people’s behavior, and my reaction to it, not doctrine ... and looking back, I can see I had other work to do, talents that wouldn’t blossom under a religious set-up; but once I did come back and get fully ordained, I’ve seen the depths and had my own sense of long-range hope.

All that’s to say, there’s not much left out of the Good Book, if you give it time.

Jesus makes that point in today’s Gospel when he says, “How hard it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God!” What does that mean?

Well, we have to remember that most scripture was written during a time when most people were poor, with a few leaders really in charge. Not much talk about equality or freedom.

And Jesus is insisting leaders don’t understand power the way God does. God has all the power, in Jesus’s look at things. Kings and queens and pharaohs just don’t matter much in his view. “Why call you me good?” he says to the rich young ruler in today’s example. “There is no one good but God.” Then he goes on to encourage Peter and all the disciples, everybody who signs up and heads where he’s heading .. and lo and behold, there’s that same old cross that Mark keeps making central to his whole understanding of Jesus. In Mark, the end is not a throne, but the very opposite.

And even though Mark says Jesus is right, and Jesus promises God’s kingdom to those who take up their cross and follow him, the last thing we see in Mark is the cross. And even then, Jesus can’t quit his single point...”But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

So here we are, back with Job. We've got to get out of this awful trap the whole great center of Job's story goes over and over. Somehow, we've got to get free of this whole world God has allowed Satan to roam up and down in. Somehow, you and I have to leave everything that matters to us in our eyes, and see what God counts on for us.

That's everything we're born with, everything we cling to, all the attachments that come with being alive, until they don't. Tough-talking as Holy Scripture is, you can't have it both ways. Either you head for something God aims for, something God will produce out of nothing but faith and trust in God and you working together, or the lights eventually go out.

I can't describe it, I can't see it except dimly in the lovelight God surrounds us each uniquely with by God's power and design ... but that's what we're called to head for.

Jesus is insistent: Not many make it. "Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

Let us pray.

O God in heaven, we here on earth cling so fiercely to what we came in with, and what you have so firmly attached us to: Birth, family, familiarity of all kinds. Help us to see that's only the start of what you intend. You may call us far beyond what we love and trust in the original sense. You may see that we will never bloom and grow, in character and in contribution to the world and the future you rule so completely, unless we step forward when you call and love as you train us to love, in this great adventure you guide and grow us into. Show us how to walk away from what only holds us back from our fuller development. Give us trusting hearts that go deep where you plant our feet, and soar high where you already see us flying, through the love of Jesus, our teacher and your beloved Son, on earth as in heaven, Amen.