

## **The 27<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

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

**Job 1:1; 2:1-10** begins the greatest wisdom literature in scripture with the words, “There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil” (1:1). In those few sentences, the stage is set for an examination of the reason for undeserved suffering, exploring why bad things happen to good people.

The book of Job actually consists of two works. The first is a prose tale of a man who falls a victim to a heavenly competition, but remains faithful to God (1:1—2:13 and 42:7-17). The second section is a poetic work (3:1—41:34) that deals in amazing honesty with the problem of human suffering, refusing to settle for simple or pietistic answers.

The prologue (1:1—2:13) begins with an introduction of Job as being a man from “the land of Uz” who is “blameless and upright”, who “fears God” and avoids evil. He is very wealthy – both in possessions and in children. That wealth is expressed symbolically, built around the numbers of 7 (symbolizing completeness) and 10 (symbolizing perfection). Thus, he has seven sons and three daughters (equaling ten), seven thousand sheep and three thousand camels (10,000), five hundred oxen and five hundred donkeys (1,000).

Unwittingly, Job gets caught as the target in a competition between God and Satan. “One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. The Lord said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil” (1:6, 8). Satan’s reply, inevitably, is in essence “Of course he fears you and turns away from evil! Look at all you have given to him. It is in his self-interest to be faithful to you. But give him to me, and we’ll see how long he continues to act blamelessly and upright” (cf. 1:9-12).

God gives Job into the hands of Satan, and the world collapses for Job. In a single day, all of his children are killed. Likewise, all of his work animals and livestock are killed and his entire fortune is wiped out (1:13-19). What, now, will Job do?

Job’s response is a fully faithful response. Tearing his robe, shaving his head and falling on the ground in mourning, Job declares “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” (1:20). And the text tells us, “In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing” (1:21).

The heavenly court reconvenes, and Satan comes before God once again. God reminds Satan of how Job has remained faithful before him in spite of the loss of all his children and of his entire estate. “Skin for skin”, Satan replies. “All that people have they will give to save their lives. But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face” (2:4-5). God gives permission to Satan to physically afflict Job, “only spare his life” (2:6).

This is exactly what Satan does. Job comes down with “loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head” (2:7). They are so bad, Job sits on an ash heap, scraping himself

with a broken piece of pottery in order to rid himself of the terrible itching and pain that is infecting his entire body.

It is at this point that Job's wife has had enough. She is the only family member left. But she viciously turns against Job. "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die" (2:9). Job's reply to her is the high point of a committed even if incredulous faith. "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" And then the author tells us, "In all this Job did not sin with his lips" (2:10).

There are several important points this story raises. The first is understanding Satan.

The name "Satan" is a Hebrew word (actually "Ha-satan"). This Hebrew word primarily means to obstruct or oppose. It is used of obstructing a man's path (Num. 22:22, 32), opposing in war (I Sam. 29:4), placing charges against a defendant in court (Ps. 109:6), and being an adversary against God or humans (Pss. 38:20; 109:4, 20, 29). The word is not the name of a divine being, but a description of the nature of this being. The name "Satan" is better translated "the satan". This being is given names only in the New Testament – Devil [Rev. 12:9, 10; Apollyon or "destroyer" (Rev. 9:11); Tempter (Matt. 4:3; I Thess. 3:5) and the Wicked One (I John 5:18, 19).

The satan is presented in Job 1 and 2 as a member of God's divine court – a courtier or "angel". But he is an angel who, in all his being, wishes to oppose God and play the adversary. Therefore, he impugns the integrity of Job, and is predictably challenged to a contest by God to see whether Job's integrity is due to God's beneficence or because Job genuinely loves God. Such a contest, whether it would occur in a heavenly or in an earthly court was a common way of settling disputes at the time the book of Job was written.

It is important in Job's portrayal of Satan to note that Satan is not equal to God, heading a rival kingdom. He is God's subordinate (a "dark" angel) who can act only with God's permission and only within the strictures God has set on the contest. So, clearly, Satan is a lesser power than God (good and evil are not equal) and is ultimately under God's authority!

Second, God seems to come off in this story as an arbitrary, insensitive and perhaps manipulative deity. He doesn't seem to have much compassion, much less love, for Job. But no Jew reading this story before or during the time of Jesus would feel this way about the God portrayed in Job. That reaction is purely a 21<sup>st</sup> century reaction. Even in Jesus' understanding of God as "father", that image was one of the "patriarchal father", the great and wise one ruling justly over his extended family, not the loving, engaged "daddy" playing with his children! God was the "high king" – the king above all kings, the monarch of both the heavens and the earth. It is his very responsibility to judge, to rule and to arbitrate. God was to test those who gave allegiance to him to see what that allegiance was based upon. And in Job's case, God's conviction that his allegiance was based on complete commitment to God was proven right.

Third, there are a number of names for God in Hebrew (22 in all). It is particularly noteworthy that the name most used for God in Job 1-2 is the name, "Yahweh" (also in 38:1; 40:1 and throughout 42). Yahweh is the covenant name, the name of God that stresses that God makes everlasting covenant with God's people. That covenant is based upon God's commitment to

God's people, no matter what may befall them. God will remain faithful to them, whether they remain faithful to God. No matter the tragedies we as God's people may face, God remains in covenant with us, loving and being merciful to us – from the first until the last!

That is the importance of Job's responses in 1:20-22 and 2:10. Together, these make up the primary "wisdom-poem" of the book of Job – the heart of its message. "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" (1:21). "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad" (2:10)?

These two wisdom poems are statements of stewardship. All that we have and all that we are given is by the graciousness of God. We never deserve it, and it never comes as reward for any innate goodness within us. All that we possess – whether it be livestock or grain, goods or house, children or spouse – all that we possess is never truly ours. It is always God's gift to us, temporarily invested in us. Therefore, it can be given to us and it can be taken away. Both the good and the bad come to us as gift or duty. This is the way life simply is. Therefore, God's people are called to both recognize and live by this reality, giving praise to God for whatever God chooses to do with what ultimately is His, even when it is invested in us!

**Psalm 26** would be the ideal psalm for Job to express his emotions over the cataclysmic problems that fell upon him. Whether the authors of the book of Job knew of Psalm 26, we do not know. But Psalm 26 falls into the category of "if it wasn't written for Job's situation, it ought to have been!"

The intent of the psalm is caught up in its opening prayer. "Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the Lord without wavering. Prove me, O Lord, and try me; test my heart and mind. For your steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in faithfulness to you" (vss. 1-2).

Somehow, this Psalmist's faith or commitment to God has been tested by something happening external to him, and that is eliciting an internal response of anger, frustration or confusion. This isn't the way that life is supposed to be; it just isn't fair! Thus, the Psalmist cries to God for vindication and liberation from that which is oppressing him. And he believes he has every right to make such a demand because "I do not sit with the worthless nor consort with hypocrite" (vs. 3), "I hate the company of evildoers" (vs. 4), "I wash my hands in innocence" (vs. 6) and "I love the house in which you dwell" (i.e., the Temple) (vs. 8). In other words, this Psalmist does everything that is expected of him and lives an exemplary life. Therefore, why should bad things happen to this good person?

But trouble has, indeed, come upon him. So the Psalmist's response to this trouble is not to rail against God or against life, but rather to turn to God with a double prayer. First, "do not sweep me away with sinners" (vs. 9a). Second, "redeem me, and be gracious to me" (vs. 11b). Although "I walk in my integrity" (vs. 11a), this psalmist is also aware of his need for Godly intervention in his situation. His own actions, no matter how well intentioned, are not adequate for him to be set free from that which has brought disaster upon his life. Instead, he must turn to

God, asking that he be redeemed and experience the mercy and gracious love of God. If we keep in mind that the word “redeemed” primarily had an economic sense to it (rather than a spiritual nuance) in the Hebrew Bible, we realize that the Psalmist is asking for God to intervene and “purchase” him as if he were a slave, so that he would not experience the fate of a slave.

If such redemption occurs, then the Psalmist concludes, “My feet will stand on level ground and in the great congregation I will bless the Lord” (vs. 12). Through God’s intervention, he will be returned to his rightful position in society and he will be restored to the Hebrew community of faith from which his troubles originally ostracized him!

**Mark 10:2-16** presents two teachings by Jesus – one on marriage and divorce (10:2-12) and the other on children (vss. 13-16). As such, they seem to echo principles enunciated by Paul in his statements on marriage and children as an integral part of public life (Eph. 5:21—6:4; see my commentary on the Ephesian passage for Cycle B Ordinary Time 21) which, of course, would have been written before the Gospel of Mark, but was recalling an incident in Jesus’ ministry that had occurred 30 to 35 years earlier.

The Pharisees seek to start an argument with Jesus, dealing with the interpretation of legislation on divorce. But Jesus refuses to be drawn into this argument to justify divorce. Instead, he uses scripture to stress the sanctity of marriage. By doing so, he defends the person in the marriage who legally is disenfranchised and therefore can easily be exploited. Later, he does the same thing in regards to children, who are also the vulnerable party in the New Testament era.

In Roman law, both the husband or wife could legally accuse the other of committing adultery and either could sue for divorce. But this was not the case in Jewish law. Only the husband could act to divorce, and only a husband could accuse his wife of adultery (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22). In essence, the woman was defenseless before the Law, since Israel was thoroughly a patriarchal society. It was the defenselessness and vulnerability of women and children that Jesus is seeking to rectify by his argument in this Sunday’s Gospel lesson.

In defending the right for men to divorce their wives, the Pharisees state, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce his wife” (10:4). They are referring to the stipulation on divorce presented in Deut. 24:1-4. Now it is up to Jesus to either agree with them or to disagree. They know that Jesus is opposed to divorce, so their hope is that he will disagree, thus enabling them to accuse him of disobeying the Law.

But Jesus will not be so easily caught. He responds, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (10:5-9).

Rather than to place himself in the position of disagreeing and thus seeming to break the Law of Moses, Jesus counters scripture with scripture. The Pharisees had quoted Deut. 24:1. Jesus, in turn, quotes back to them Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 (which also conforms to Eph. 5:31). Jesus

fights scripture with scripture! And he places the Genesis passages above the permission to divorce found in Deut. 24:1, by stating “Because of the hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you”.

What Jesus is here arguing is that God made a reluctant accommodation to people like you Pharisees, because you are such sinners. But divorce was never God’s intent for a marriage. When one marries, he becomes “one flesh” with another, so that to separate that “one flesh” would be in essence a massive operation of what should not be separated.

By making this argument, Jesus insists that the intent of scripture, like the intent of God, is to build within God’s community (i.e. Israel) human relationships (e.g., marriage and parenting) that are a part of the covenant God has made between God’s self and Israel (or the church). Therefore, you should live your life and practice your faith, not as an individual but as part of God’s larger covenant community. Therefore, as an integral part of God’s community, “what God has joined together, let no one separate”, whether it is marriage, parenting, the conduct of your business or of political decisions.

The next section deals with children, another marginalized group in Israel (10:13-16). Parents were bringing their children to Jesus in order to receive his blessing upon them – a traditional act performed by any rabbi. But his disciples, concerned with the press of the crowd, try to dissuade these parents. The text tells us that when Jesus saw what his disciples were doing, “he was indignant” with their actions. Stopping them, he told his disciples, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” (vv. 14-15).

In this action, Jesus rescues children from the margins of Jewish society and puts them in its center. “He took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them” (10:16). Those who are dismissed, ignored and marginalized because they have no political, economic or social weight are most thoroughly and conspicuously received by Jesus. He includes them in while all others (including the disciples) thrust them out! Jesus does this because these children are the epitome of the solidarity of God’s covenant community with God’s people.

Children, to Jesus, are the very essence of God’s covenant with Israel (or the church), in that they bring nothing of wisdom, knowledge, experience, wealth or power to that covenant. They only bring themselves. They come as open and receptive receivers of the grace of God because they have nothing to contribute. Children, Jesus is teaching, are the very essence of the Christian community, precisely because they are both so innocent and so minimized and marginalized. They are therefore example to us of how to receive God’s shalom community, for “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it”!

The essence of Jesus’ argument here is that people are most important, not principles! All people (even wives and children) are equal before God, and should therefore be equal before us. To use the power of your position, your sex or your tradition to marginalize or minimize anyone (i.e., use power unilaterally) is to sin against God, humanity and the people whom you are treating this way. Rather, what God calls us to is equal care and equal commitment to all people,

no matter their lack of position, their sex, race, ethnic origin or age. In God's kingdom, no one is inferior to anyone else, and therefore building relationships of justice, love and humility (Micah 6:8) is what authentic religion is all about. The task is to build human society around relational power, not unilateral power!

**Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12** is one of a few statements in the New Testament that posit a particularly high Christology (others are John 1:1-18, Phil. 2:6-11 and Col. 1:15-20). The opening lines are both poetic and majestic in stating Jesus' place in God's eternal order: "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds" (1:1-2).

The high Christology of Hebrews 1:1-4 becomes the template for the remainder of the book of Hebrews. In these few verses, the author of Hebrews presents the scope of whom Christ is and what he came to do. The Son is described through seven consecutive statements in this passage, as follows:

1. Jesus is the "heir of all things" (1:2) – that is, he is the chosen Son of God, inheriting the mantle of Israel's Messiah (Ps. 2:7; Col. 1:16);
2. He is God's agent for the creation of the world (1:2) (John 1:3; I Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16);
3. He is the "refection of 'God's glory'" (1:3), likened to the rays of the sun so that, in his very being, he radiates God (John 1:14; II Cor. 4:6);
4. He is "the exact imprint of God's very being" (1:3), the Greek normally being used of a coin produced from a die (II Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15);
5. Jesus is the one who "sustains all things by his powerful word" – the one who shapes and maintains all creation as the Word (John 1:1-10; Col. 1:17);
6. He is the one who has "made purification for sins" (1:3) – a primary theme of the book of Hebrews, referring to Christ's sacrificial death for humanity (Col. 1:17);
7. Jesus is the one who, because of his atoning work, has "sat down at the right hand of God" (that is, on a throne to the right of God's throne, 1:3), thus now ruling the world as the Son of God, and therefore, is deity (Ps. 110:1; John 1:1-18; Phil. 2:6-11; Colo. 1:15-20).

The author of Hebrews then notes that Christ has "become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs" (1:4). What the writer of Hebrews is clearly concerned about is the development of a pre-Gnostic or Gnostic interpretation of Christianity emerging in the early church that exalts the work of "demi-gods" or angels (see the commentary for James 3-4 for Cycle B Ordinary Time 25 for further elaboration on Gnosticism). This author wants to make it clear that Jesus is far superior to the angels and has done what they cannot do – both shared in the creation of the world and provided an atoning sacrifice for humanity. Thus, Jesus is no angel or "demi-god". He is God incarnate!

In Hebrews 2:5-12, the author continues with his theme of the work of Jesus as creator and redeemer (2:5). But he then states that this unique Son of God had to be humiliated and to die in order to accomplish humanity's salvation (2:6-8). It was out of this humiliation and suffering,

however, that both redemption takes place for the world and Jesus is exalted to the highest place of heaven (2:9).

The writer of Hebrews then moves on to a reflection upon suffering as absolutely essential for salvation and transformation to occur. “It was fitting,” he writes, “that God for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters” (2:9-11).

The author of Hebrews claims that all those who have been chosen and redeemed by God are Jesus’ “brothers and sisters” in the faith. But he is very careful to insist we “children” come into saving relationship with God through the suffering and sacrificial death of Jesus. The only way we can reach the glory promised by God to humankind is through God’s unique Son suffering and dying on our behalf. It is that death that frees us from the constraints of both personal and corporate sin, and allows us to embrace the kingdom God intends for the world. Salvation cannot occur without suffering. Transformation of society cannot occur except through death!

It is because of Jesus’ immense love for us that empowered him to go to his death for our sake that he can now call us “brothers and sisters”, the author of Hebrews argues. Because Jesus is the embodiment of the holiness and purity of God, we would expect him to recoil from identifying with such sinners as we are. But instead, he embraces us as his brothers and sisters, those for whom he is willing to die. We are made one with God and each other because of Jesus’ oneness with us by willingly suffering and dying for us. And thus, we have become one with him – those people who are known to the rest of the world as “Christians” – “Christ-ones”!

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