

The 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Job 23:1-17; Psalm 22:1-15; Mark 10:17-31; Hebrews 4:12-16

Job 23:1-17 is the culminating poem in a progression of thought that moves through the poetry section of the book of Job. The progression is as follows:

- Ch. 9: Job doubts that God will even listen to his complaint, much less do anything about it.
- Ch. 13: Job concludes that he will eventually get a hearing from God.
- Ch. 17: He believes that death inevitably awaits him as the conclusion of the matter, but his critics will see that his contentions were right and he will be vindicated.
- Ch. 19: Job need not doubt God, even though he cannot get a hearing from God.
- Ch. 23: God knows what God's about and is using Job's pain as a way of using Job to carry out God's intentions in the world.

Job 23, therefore, is the culminating statement of God's intentions in allowing suffering in the life of one who is obedient to God. The poet develops that argument through two emphases in this chapter.

The first emphasis consists of 23:1-9. In this section, Job wants to find God and present his case before him. But it is as if the doors of heaven are shut tight, and God is closed to him. "Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling," Job laments (23:3). But "if I go forward, God is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him," Job complains. "On the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him" (23:8-9).

God seems inaccessible to Job. Intriguingly, Job uses the imagery of Psalm 139:7-12 to articulate his complaint. But rather than that Psalm's use of that imagery to express God's presence, Job uses the obverse to describe God's absence. But even though God is currently inaccessible to him, Job believes that one day he will be declared innocent by God, and thus will be vindicated. That, in turn, brings us to the second emphasis.

Second, although all seems dark to Job right now, he believes that God knows what God's about and will make that way known to Job when the time is right. God may, for the moment, seem unapproachable, obscure and even absent as Job goes through his "Valley of Despond". But "God knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold" (23:10). The trial through which Job is going is comparable to the smelting process, as he- through suffering – is turned from dross to gold. Thus, "God will complete what he appoints for me, and many such things are in his mind" (23:14). Even in the most obscure and uncertain situations in our life, Job is discovering, God is at work in us making us into the people he created and intends us to be. For God has intentions for our lives, and God is thus working out those intentions through the very process of suffering through which he is placing us.

The rich truth that Job is discovering and articulating in chapter 23 was beautifully stated in a poem written nearly 60 years ago. It is a poem that has spoken profoundly to me ever since I discovered it 50 years ago.

When God wants to drill a man,
And thrill a man,
And skill a man,
When God wants to mold a man
To play the noblest part;
When He yearns with all His heart
To create so great and bold a man
That all the world shall be amazed,
Watch His methods, watch His ways!
How He ruthlessly perfects
Whom He royally elects!
How He hammers him and hurts him,
And with mighty blows converts him
Into trial shapes of clay which
Only God understands;
While his tortured heart is crying
And he lifts beseeching hands!
How He bends but never breaks
When his good He undertakes;
How He uses whom He chooses,
And with every purpose fuses him;
By every act induces him
To try His splendor out –
God knows what He's about!¹

Psalm 22:1-15 is all about obedience to God's call in the face of the most extreme suffering and persecution. It is the description of how one who is faithful to Yahweh has to bear the consequences of such faithfulness. And that ultimate consequence is death!

It was Psalm 22:1 that was quoted by Jesus from the cross (Matthew 27:46). But many biblical scholars believe that he actually quoted the entire psalm rather than just its opening lines. The reason why that possibility is suggested is that it is *the* classical prophecy of the suffering and execution of God's suffering servant, his "Son of Man", the Messiah.

It begins with a powerful cry for help directed to God. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest" (22:1-2).

It is a very poignant and powerful cry of distress. The servant feels utterly abandoned by God and rejected by humanity. It therefore captures the very essence of the pain of those who would follow Yahweh in utter obedience – but most eloquently of all, the Son of Man (Messiah).

¹Cathy Pierce, "When God Wants A Man", <http://romanticpoetry.angelcities.com/index.html>. Used by permission.

Consider how this psalm describes one who is truly being rejected and sacrificed by his people. Consider these well-known passages selected from our Psalter lesson for this Sunday – the first 15 verses of Psalm 22.²

“I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people” (vs. 6).

“All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me; they shake their heads. ‘Commit your cause to the Lord, let him deliver – let him rescue the one in whom he delights’” (vss. 7-8).

“Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother’s breast. On you I was cast from birth, and since my mother bore me, you have been my God” (vss. 9-10).

“Many bulls encircle me, strong bulls of Bashan surround me; they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion” (vss. 12-13).

“I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast” (vs. 14).

“My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death” vs. 15).

It is a passage that can easily be likened to Jesus and his death. But it is also a passage that can be likened to the destruction and desolation that faced Job. In fact, it is a passage that can speak truthfully of any who have suffered deeply and their response to such suffering. At least in this portion of the psalm, there is no sense either of relief or of explanatory understanding for the necessity for such suffering. It is simply stating that “suffering is!” It is an inevitable part of life every bit as much as is joy and ecstasy. It is only later in the Psalm that its author begs God for deliverance (vss. 19-20). Only later in the Psalm will God grant such deliverance (vs. 21). And only later will one be able to begin to discern God’s intentions behind such suffering and the way it has worked for the redemption of society (vss. 22-31). But for now, one must simply live within the limitations of life tumbling in upon one!

Mark 10:17-31 is the story of a man whose wealth stands between him and his embrace of the kingdom of God (also, see Matt. 19:16-30 and Luke 18:18-30). This rich young ruler asks Jesus, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life” (10:17)? Jesus responds by giving the traditional rabbinic answer to the man, “Have you kept the commandments” (vss. 18-19)? The man replies, “Teacher I have kept all these since my youth” (vs. 20), but with the implication, “but I still don’t feel saved!” Jesus then replies, not to the man’s words but to his intention, “There is one more thing you need to do – go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (vs. 21). Hearing this, the man is “shocked”, rejects the Master’s command, and goes away “grieving, for he had many possessions” (vs. 22).

² It should be noted that the cry of rejection and sacrifice found in Psalm 22 goes beyond its first 15 verses, for the entirety of the psalm (22:1-31 is a cry of dereliction (see Cycle B, Lent 2 and Oeaster tide 5).

This story makes the most sense when one realizes what the man meant when he initiated the encounter with Jesus by asking, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” He was *not* asking, “What must I do to go to heaven when I die?” He was asking, “What must I do to enter the kingdom of God?” What must he do to join Jesus’ movement to realize God’s intentions for humanity? That this is what the man was asking and that this is what Jesus understood he was asking is witnessed to be Jesus’ response to his disciples in 10:23-27 (in fact, Jesus substitutes in verse 23 the term “kingdom of God” for the man’s “eternal life”). Otherwise, Jesus’ response simply doesn’t make any sense within this context. This man is asking what he needs to do in order to join Jesus’ reforming movement to bring the world (both each individual and the political, economic and religious systems) back to the practice of God’s intentions for the world.

Jesus cuts to the heart of the matter. One doesn’t realize God’s intentions for society simply by keeping the commandments or by observing one’s religion. Even if the rich young ruler had assiduously kept all the commandments and had done nothing wrong, his love and acceptance of his great riches in the face of such inequitable social conditions and the obvious result of that inequity – the suffering of the poor – meant that he had broken the greatest commandment of all, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6:5; cf. Mt. 22:37). It was not so much that this man possessed great riches as it was that his great riches possessed him!

Thus, the logical conclusion that Jesus comes to is “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God” (vs. 23). It is exceedingly hard, not because of the presence of that wealth as much as it is what that wealth does to you. To “enter the kingdom of God” is to become committed to working for political justice for all, an equitable sharing of wealth so that none are too rich nor too poor, the eradication of poverty, and the embrace of a relational inclusivity for all who love Yahweh. One can’t work for such a kingdom and at the same time hold on to “great riches” – because those “great riches” are perpetrated only by an inequitable maintenance of wealth. To belong to Jesus is to work against the systems that selfishly and mindlessly build wealth and power for themselves! You can’t have it both ways! Either you have great riches or you enter the kingdom of God!

Does this then mean that no one who has great wealth can be saved? Jesus replies, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible” (v. 27). God can convert one’s purse as surely as he can convert one’s soul! Therefore, those who give themselves over to the realization of God’s kingdom will lose much – houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, fields (and wealth)” and will experience “persecution” from all those who embrace the standards of the systems. But they will also receive much in the new community of God’s kingdom-builders. For they will become a part of God’s intended humanity working for God’s intentions in the world. And thus, they will discover a richness of life that no rich or famous or powerful or prestigious person who benefits from the systems will ever know. For “many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (10:31; cf. Mt. 19:30; 20:16; Lk. 13:30; Mk. 9:35), as Jesus brings into being the Upside-Down Kingdom of the world as God intends it to be!

Hebrews 4:12-16 begins, “The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the

thoughts and intentions of the heart” (4:12). This verse is often used in regards to scripture. However, the context makes it clear that “the word of God” is the living voice of God as manifested in Jesus (4:13-16). It is Christ who is “living and active” in the hearts and souls of his chosen, giving them both discernment and wisdom so that they might perceive and act upon God’s call upon their lives and work for the kingdom.

In this passage, Jesus is likened to both the high priest of Judaism and the unblemished lamb sacrificed by that priest for the forgiveness of sins (4:14-16). Thus, the writer is using Temple worship as his symbol for the work Jesus has done for us. The high priest provides for us “mercy and grace” because he “approaches the throne of grace with boldness” (that is, the throne between the cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies). The sacrificial lamb is the symbol of atonement for our sins. Thus, both lamb and high priest express the work Christ has done for us from the “throne” of his cross!

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