

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Job 38:1-7, 34-41; Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35c; Mark 10:35-45; Hebrews 5:1-10

Job 38:1-7, 34-41 is a textually confusing passage. The poetry section of Job, beginning at chapter three, consists of accusations made by Job's three "friends" and of Job's response to them (3:1-31:40). Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar essentially argue that since God knows what he is doing, there must be some hidden unconfessed sin in Job's life that has brought about all his troubles. Job, on the other hand, argues for his innocence and the incongruity of the trouble he has received seemingly at the hand of God. The book then moves into a lengthy interruption by Elihu (32:1-37:24) in which that "friend" presents an even more persuasive version of Job's friends' argument. Then Job 38:1 declares, "Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind", and the argument then moves over to God, beginning a dialogue between God and Job (38:1-42:6). With the end of the poetry section, the reader returns to the original prose account initiated in 1:1-2:13 for the conclusion of the story (42:7-17).

What is confusing about the text is that, whereas God's rebuttal is clearly directed at Job (38:1), God's anger seems to be more directed toward Elihu, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. God's intervention concludes with God declaring that Job was right (suffering is not punishment for undisclosed sin) and his three friends are wrong. So why would God argue with Job here that God knows what God is doing and he is punishing Job for his sin. Why would God seemingly contradict himself?

Despite the opening line of this chapter, it makes much more sense to see this chapter as being directed toward Job's three friends and the shoddy job they have done in seeking to console him. This makes greater sense of the content of God's rebuttal in chapters 38 and 39, and explains why there is a second introduction of the Lord's meeting with Job in 40:1. It also explains why Job doesn't respond to God's accusations until 40:3-4.

It makes the most sense to me to view Job 38-39 as being God's confrontation of Elihu, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. Then Job 40:1-42:6 is the actual dialogue between God and Job that then brings the poetry section of Job to its conclusion with God's justification and commendation of Job. The only difficulty with this interpretation is that the text clearly states that God is addressing Job in 38:1. But that could be more of a generic statement – the "Job people" rather than Job individually.

Chapters 38 through 42 are described as a courtroom scene. God is both defense attorney and judge. The defendant is Job. The witnesses for or against Job are Elihu, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. God, in his role as defense attorney, first cross-examines the four men. Then, as judge, he consults with Job and passes sentence, declaring Job guiltless of any crime.

In this trial, God never speaks directly about Job's suffering, much less gives any explanation or rationale for it. What God does, instead, is that he launches into a series of questions that are meant to overwhelm the witnesses in order to stop their pontificating about the origins of Job's suffering and to elicit humility in them. The questions are designed to demonstrate clearly the sovereignty of God and his freedom to do whatever God chooses to do (in other words, he is the high king). Through questions that require no answer because the answer is self-evident, God

reminds them that he is sovereign of the world. It is God who is the Creator of the earth (38:4-7), the sea (vv. 8-11), and of day and night (vv. 12-15). He is the sovereign of inanimate nature (38:16-38) and of all living creatures (38:39-39:30). Therefore, as the sovereign God, he knows what he's about.

It is neither the prerogative of Job nor of his accusers to question God nor to speculate on why such seeming evil had befallen Job. Instead, it is their task to rest the matter in the sovereignty of God. For he is not Job's enemy! God loves Job and wants only the best for him. Therefore, although suffering and evil have befallen him (as suffering and evil befall everyone), God will ultimately vindicate him and set things right – and Job can trust God in even this most difficult of circumstances!

Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35c. Psalm 104 is one of the grand psalms of the Psalter, and one of Israel's great hymns of praise. This psalm is really a hymn to God as the creator of and provider to the whole world. It teems with a love for life and for the whole created order – from the universe and the earth itself to wild animals, birds, the fish of the sea – even whales!

This psalm is actually quite unique within the entire Psalter. What makes it unique is that it affirms God's creation of the universe independent of human beings. In other words, it doesn't deal with the creation of humanity as the highest work or even one among other works of God. It does call humanity to worship God for his creative power, but it does not include humanity in its hymn to God's creation.

Psalm 104 begins, “Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, you are very great. You are clothed with honor and majesty, wrapped in light as with a garment” (104:1-2a). The hymn begins, not with a statement about what it is that God has done as creator, but who God is. It is a celebration of God for God's sake. Only by the last portion of verse two does the author get into the primary intent of the psalm – to celebrate God's creative work.

The psalm continues, “You stretch out the heavens like a tent; you set the beams of your chambers on the waters; you make the clouds your chariot, you ride on the wings of the wind, you make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers. You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken. You cover it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains. At your rebuke they flee; at the sound of your thunder they take to flight. They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys to the place that you appointed for them. You set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth” (vss. 2b-9).

This entire section deals with God's creation of the universe and, in particular, the earth. It is devoid of any animal life upon it. Instead, the psalmist speaks of the earth's geography, and how its hills, mountains, valleys and oceans were formed. All this is God's work. Then the Psalmist continues.

“O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made all animals; the earth is full of your creatures. Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things, innumerable are there,

living things both small and great. There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it! These all look to you to give them their food in due season, when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created and you renew the face of the ground” (vv. 24-34).

Now comes the psalmist’s emphasis upon the creation of living organisms – “creeping things” (i.e., reptiles and insects), a teeming ocean of life, whales and elsewhere in this psalm, the “birds of the air” (vss. 12-13, 17), cattle and all domestic animals (vss. 14), and the wild animals (vss. 18-22). All these creatures God has created to praise him simply by being what God created them to be! Thus, what is presented is a world of natural abundance for all its creatures – not a world of scarcity that must be hoarded by some to the exclusion of others.

This hymn to God and his creative providence for us all ends on a note of praise to God, and yet with an imprecation against those who refuse to recognize the abundant, creative and protective love of God. In God’s world, there is no place for people or political, economic or religious systems that operate out of the assumption of scarcity rather than God’s abundance, and therefore use their power to corner that abundance for themselves. Thus, it is that this psalm ends on both a triumphant note and yet a disturbing note, creating a tension at its conclusion, a tension which is not resolved.

“I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being. May my meditation be pleasing to him for I rejoice in the Lord. Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more. Bless the Lord, O my soul. Praise the Lord” (vss. 33-35)!

Mark 10:35-45 essentially deals with Jesus’ articulation of the difference between unilateral and relational power. To understand that this is what Jesus is exploring in this passage, however, one must recall Mark’s purpose in writing his Gospel.

The Gospel of Mark was written between 65 and 70 A.D. But those are not innocuous dates. In 65-66 A.D., Israel rebelled against the hated Romans and succeeded in driving them out of Palestine. By 68 A.D., the Romans had returned with a giant army led by Rome’s most successful general at the time, and by 70 A.D., Israel was on its knees again before Rome. So the Gospel of Mark was written between the seemingly successful revolt against Rome by the Jewish rebels and the nation’s total destruction by Rome.

To understand Mark, therefore, one must recognize that the burning question faced by every Jew during that five-year interim was “Do I join the rebels or do I remain loyal to Rome?” Your very life and welfare depended on how you answered that question – and yet, you did not know which side would finally win!

What Mark does, however, is that his Gospel was written to suggest that there was a third way – a third alternative between becoming a rebel or remaining loyal to Rome. And that third way was the “Jesus way” – a radical alternative to rebellion or loyalty. That third alternative was

built upon a far more sophisticated understanding of power than the way it is normally perceived – as unilateral, dominating, controlling, pressed down upon the people disregarding their will. It was suggesting that “Jesus power” was an entirely different kind of power – the power of relationships built upon love and trust! It is in Mark 10:35-45 that the distinction between these two types of power and Jesus’ consequent calling to his followers, is most clearly articulated.

In this scripture lesson, Jesus shares with the disciples what the Jewish and Roman systems are going to do to him. He says, “The chief priests and the scribes will condemn me to death, they will hand me over to the Romans, who will mock me, spit upon me, flog and kill me” (Mark 10:33-34, adapted).

After receiving this bad news, two of Jesus’ disciples (James and John) ask for special status in Jesus’ kingdom as if they haven’t heard a word Jesus has just said (which they hadn’t, because they didn’t have “ears that hear”). Jesus denies them their request (10:35-40). The ten disciples, hearing of James and John’s request, take great umbrage at it and complain to Jesus. Jesus’ response to their anger lays out the standards for the use of power by the Christian community (10:36-45).

Jesus contrasts the exercise of leadership by “Gentile rulers” (that is, the Roman colonial administrators and the collaborating Jewish priests, Pharisees and Sadducees) and Jesus’ style of leadership. How do they differ? Jesus says, “Among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them” (10:42). The Gentile rulers and their Jewish counterparts rule by dominance. Whether that leadership is political, economic or religious, it is all built upon the premise that “might makes right”. They are “tyrants” – exercising power unilaterally that results in a selected few having authority and domination over all others.

That’s why the alternative of revolution that is being pursued by the Jewish rebels that have driven out the Roman army is no alternative at all. Like the Romans, revolutionaries also operate on the premise that “might makes right”. The Jewish revolutions might conceivably amass sufficient power to throw off the shackles of Rome and the Jewish priesthood (they actually didn’t, but nobody knew that at the time of the writing of this Gospel). But even if the revolutionaries succeed, what will they have actually won? With what will they replace Roman oppression and priestly dominance? The oppressed, rising up to overthrow the oppressors, always become the new oppressors! Different people but the same scenario with the same results – the people are still oppressed, but now by their own countrymen rather than by Rome and its Jewish collaborators. That is why revolution is not a radical response, but a reactionary response. And that is why revolution is always bound to fail – even when it succeeds!

So what will work to liberate the people of Israel? Mark would insist that it would be the third way of Jesus.

What is that third way? Jesus then says to his disciples, “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43-45).

The root of the problem, Jesus is teaching, is our understanding of power. Both Roman governor and Jewish revolutionary alike, both Jewish priest and Jewish peasant understand power as unilateral, as domination, as command-and-control. But what if Godly power is something profoundly different? What if true power is relational?

In this radical statement by Jesus, he is teaching that *the image of a servant captures the essence of true power!* The “one who gives his life as a ransom for many” captures the essence of true power.

In other words, what Jesus is teaching his disciples in this Scripture and what Mark is teaching his readers is the profound power of relationships, if they are astutely exercised. Rather than “power over”, relational power is “power with”, shared power, mutual power, reciprocal power – the power that love and trust can build. It is not the power of weakness, of acquiescence, of apathy. It is direct, specific, realistic, flexible, accountable and negotiable. It is a power that is built upon the relationships one has carefully built with others and that consequently seek the good of the other as well as one’s own self. Therefore, by definition, it is a power that seeks “not to be served but to serve” even if that means giving one’s life as “a ransom for many”. This is Jesus’ “third way” – the radical solution that, if embraced, will keep the Jewish and Roman worlds from destroying each other.

But sadly, it is not embraced. So, just like all the warring nations before them and after them, one destroys the other and in the process, destroys its own soul. For dominating power eventually leads to the destruction of everyone involved in its struggle!

Hebrews 5:1-10 explores the nature of Jesus’ priestly role in the redemption of God’s people. The author of Hebrews undertakes that exploration by using the work and office of the high priest in the Jewish cult in order to compare and contrast Jesus’ redemptive work.

The high priest, the author of Hebrews points out, is one of the people and thus is able to identify with them. But he is also a sinner, and therefore he must offer sacrifice for the forgiveness of his own sins, in order to be able to mediate for the people’s sins (5:2-3). Jesus contrasts with this reality, because although he too is called and appointed by God as high priest, he is sinless and therefore needs no atonement (vv. 4-5). Rather, as the Son of God (Ps. 2:7), he is also a priest “according to the order of Melchizedek” (cf. Ps. 110:4), a shadowy priest who was not part of the Aaronic or Levitical tradition but preceded it, and was like unto a “son of God” (vv.6-7; Gen. 14:18).

Jesus, the author of Hebrews writes, “offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, and he was heard. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered, and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (vv. 7-9). Although Jesus has always been the Son of God and always sinless, Jesus both felt and expressed the deepest of anguish for the sinfulness of humans and the prospect of his own suffering. Yet it was precisely his willingness to suffer and in being obedient to God’s call for him to suffer and die that he became “the source of eternal salvation” for us all. It was that

obedience that made his sacrifice redemptive for us all and confirmed his appointment as a priest of Melchizedek's line, able to bring about for all of us atonement for our sin.

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(Cycle B Ordinary Time 29.doc)