

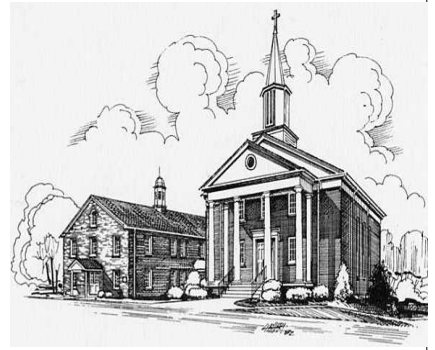
The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Sunday closest to October 5

Proper 22

Year B

RCL



Job 1:1; 2:1-10

Psalm 8

Mark 10:2-16

The Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray, and to give more than we either desire or deserve: Pour upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things for which we are not worthy to ask, except through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Savior; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Job 1:1; 2:1-10

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.

One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the LORD. The LORD said to Satan, “Where have you come from?” Satan answered the LORD, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.” 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. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason.” Then Satan answered the LORD, “Skin for skin! 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.” The LORD said to Satan, “Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life.”

So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.

Then his wife said to him, “Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.” But he said to her, “You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

Psalm 8 Page 592, BCP

Domine, Dominus noster

- 1 O LORD our Governor,
 how exalted is your Name in all the world!
- 2 Out of the mouths of infants and children
 your majesty is praised above the heavens.
- 3 You have set up a stronghold against your adversaries,
 to quell the enemy and the avenger.
- 4 When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,
 the moon and the stars you have set in their courses,
- 5 What is man that you should be mindful of him?
 the son of man that you should seek him out?
- 6 You have made him but little lower than the angels;
 you adorn him with glory and honor;
- 7 You give him mastery over the works of your hands;
 you put all things under his feet:
- 8 All sheep and oxen,
 even the wild beasts of the field,
- 9 The birds of the air, the fish of the sea,
 and whatsoever walks in the paths of the sea.
- 10 O LORD our Governor,
 how exalted is your Name in all the world!

Mark 10:2-16

Some Pharisees came, and to test Jesus they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.” But Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he 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.”

Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “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 re-

ceive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

SERMON

Reading the book of Job is a harrowing experience, and I mean that in both senses of the word “harrow”. Job is a keenly disturbing book, a disquieting book. But it is also like a farmer's harrow which is drawn over a field to ready it for planting. In the same way that a farmer's harrow breaks up clods and roots out weeds, the book of Job breaks up those parts of our being which have become clotted, choked by weeds, and unproductive. The book of Job gives us an opportunity to reflect on just what we think about God and our place within His Creation. Ask yourself how you think you, God and His Creation relate to one another? You might surprise yourself!

If you think that everybody thinks the same things about God that you do, you haven't spent much time at the Chapel of St. Starbuck. Finding agreement, even among Christians, about issues of faith is one very

tough row to hoe. Some people see God as the creator of the universe who just set it in motion, then left. This was the view of Thomas Jefferson, for instance. Some people see our existence as a titanic struggle between two titanic forces – God and the devil – for ownership of our souls. Other people see God as sovereign and insist that no devil can take from God's hand what is God's. Some think it's all down to human willingness to follow God's commandments and don't believe that God has any part to play beyond score keeper.

Interestingly, some people view the blessings we enjoy and the suffering we experience as tangible evidence of God's current opinion of us. This last was the view of a fellow the scholars call “The Deuteronomistic Historian” because they ascribe to him the writing of the “Deuteronomistic History”. Of course, properly, there is no book named “The Deuteronomistic History” and no person identified as “The Deuteronomistic His-

torian”. The scholars love to name people and things. The term is a modern theoretical construct suggesting that behind the present forms of the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings there was an original single work and the scholars named it “The Deuteronomistic History”. Be that as it may, one of the things the Deuteronomistic Historian seemed to believe was that God blesses those who shape their lives in ways pleasing to Him, and curses those who don't. From that we can derive that God loves rich people and holds poor people in contempt. If you're rich it means God approves of you, and if your body is covered in loathsome sores and you are destitute, it's because God is mad at you. Unless your name is Job.

The Book of Job is sometimes called, tongue in cheek, the anti-Deuteronomist book because Job became destitute, his children were killed and he was covered in loathsome sores not because God was mad at

him, but to settle a dispute in God's Royal court that he had no way of knowing about. In fact, Job was the exact opposite of the stereotype of an evil person offered by the Deuteronomistic Historian.

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.

We must understand and embrace this powerful statement in everything we say about Job. Job is blameless. One of my students refused to take this step, maintaining that no one is blameless, all have sinned and fallen short of the Grace of God. “Yes”, I said, “but God Himself describes Job as blameless. Is that not good enough?”

He insisted that God's evaluation of Job was not good enough for him. You and I will need to do better. Job is blameless. Nothing that happens to him is as a result of anything he did wrong. In fact, since he is blameless,

and God is trying to demonstrate that to Satan, you could say that the stripes he bears are a result of his blamelessness. You might want to keep that in mind.

In fact, Job went overboard in his righteousness. The text tells us:

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. ... His sons used to go and hold feasts in one another's houses in turn; and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. And when the feast days had run their course, Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt-offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, 'It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts.' This is what Job always did.

So, Job was not only blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil; he also took extra care for his children lest they sin in their hearts, so when his animals are taken away, his barns destroyed,

his children killed in a windstorm, his very body wracked with loathsome sores, he has no idea where this is coming from. I can't even imagine the anguish of his cries, “What did I do to deserve this?”. Yet, Job’s wife notes with some annoyance, he persists in his integrity. He responds to her demand that he curse God and die with a powerful sermon of his own, “You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” The book of Job asks if people will worship God apart from promises of reward and threats of punishment. If submitting ourselves to God and worshiping Him is virtue, is virtue its own reward, or must God kick in some boot?

If our compulsion to love and follow God is based on no more than a carrot and a stick, it will never survive. If our compulsion to love and follow God lives within us without thought for the carrot or concern for the

stick, then our faith will withstand any calamity. That's the thing the book of Job gives us to think about – are we Christians because it is in that way that we get the carrots, the easy life, the heavenly pass? Are we Christians because we fear the stick of eternal torment, or are we Christians for some other reason? Good question.

The book of Job opens by giving us a glimpse of a meeting of God's heavenly court.

One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the LORD.

If we want to understand the text as written without unconsciously imposing our own understanding onto it, we have to be careful here. Those who see life as a titanic struggle between God and Satan for our souls are apt to misread this passage. The character we are reading in English as “Satan”, a proper name, in Hebrew is, “haSatan”, a title. “Ha” is the definite article, “the” in

English, and “satan” means “accuser” so this character who our imagination equips with horns and hooves isn't that guy at all. He is The Accuser, a sort of heavenly District Attorney. The significant thing to notice about him is that he is in no way God's opponent. HaSatan can do nothing without God's express permission.

God has determined to demonstrate Job's blamelessness to haSatan, and this is the place where everybody gets uncomfortable. Job is going to bear the unbearable and suffer the insufferable in order for God to show haSatan an honorable man. We can't help but be offended. We side with Job. We have been given a glimpse of what is happening in the heavenly court, but Job knows nothing of it. Job suffers the loss of his wealth and his children and his health and can only cry out, “What did I do to deserve this?” Our compassion is inflamed because undeserved suffering offends us. We want to live in the Deuteronomistic Historian's world where good

behavior is rewarded and suffering comes only to those who deserve it. We want to live in a carrot and stick Creation. This is why Job is sometimes called the anti-Deuteronomist book. Job's suffering is completely undeserved. Job bears his losses precisely BECAUSE he is blameless. Job turns the Deuteronomist's world upside-down.

If the hints I've been dropping up to this point haven't alerted you yet that I'm suggesting a parallel between Job's suffering and the suffering of Jesus, then I haven't been hinting very well. Jesus also suffered undeservedly. The stripes Jesus bore were borne precisely because of His innocence and affect us precisely the same way in which the suffering of Job affects us. The life of Jesus poses the same question – is it possible for people to serve God apart from promises of reward and threats of punishment? Jesus answered that question in the affirmative.

Nevertheless, our need to live in a carrot and stick Creation, within the vision of the Deuteronomic Historian, is so strong! We align ourselves with Job's wife, who says, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die." She's saying, "I know you didn't do anything to deserve this, but the possibility of undeserved suffering makes me enormously uncomfortable. Do something to deserve it, right now, so I can feel better. Restore to me my carrot and stick world, for in such a world, I do not have to feel compassion for those who suffer. I can engage in the fiction that they had it coming."

It is the voice of Job's wife that I hear in the political discussions of today. I hear people say of the unemployed, of the poor, that they are lazy, that they refuse to work, that they are deadbeats. I see people today who would celebrate the signs we saw at the city limits of many towns during the Great Depression, "Unemployed

men, keep moving”.

Compassion for the suffering of others is a difficult, yet it is the essence of the Gospel. We are more comfortable dividing the world up into good guys who live orderly lives of plenty because God smiles upon them, and bad guys who live in squalor as the price of their sins. In other words, we want to live in the world of the Deuteronomistic Historian. Job did not live in such a world. Jesus did not live in such a world. We do not live in such a world.

We all have had the experience of witnessing a child fall from his bicycle on to the gravels of a road and felt the sharp stones tear into his flesh as if it were our own knee that was being skinned. I would that we cultivate the ability to share the sufferings of others with the same immediacy. I would that we cultivate a compassion which drives us to comfort those who suffer with the same immediacy that we are driven to pick up the

child and comfort him.

Job has harrowed our fields. He has told us that our faith need not depend on promises of favor or threat of punishment, but arises within us in response to God's love for us. Job teaches that virtue *is* its own reward, and that God does not have to kick in boot to reach us. Our part of the bargain is to abandon our insistence upon a carrot and stick world that is to our liking and our convenience, and to embrace the world of undeserved suffering in which we live, dedicating ourselves to bringing comfort to a hurting world.

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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Last Sunday, Mordecai told Esther, “Do not think that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s family will perish.” His message to Esther was that God may not have shared all His plans with you, but God’s will will be done on earth as it is in heaven, and to oppose God is to die. That is, I think, exactly the situation with Job.