

*The Lessons Appointed for Use on the*  
**Sunday closest to October 19**

**Proper 24**  
**Year B**  
**RCL**



Job 38:1-7  
Psalm 104:1-9, 25, 37b  
Mark 10:35-45

**The Collect**

Almighty and everlasting God, in Christ you have revealed your glory among the nations: Preserve the works of your mercy, that your Church throughout the world may persevere with steadfast faith in the confession of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

**Job 38:1-7, (34-41)**

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind:

“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

Gird up your loins like a man,  
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

Who determined its measurements – surely you know!

Or who stretched the line upon it?

On what were its bases sunk,

or who laid its cornerstone

when the morning stars sang together

and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?”

**Psalm 104:1-9, 25, 37b Page 735, BCP**

Benedic, anima mea

- 1 Bless the LORD, O my soul; O LORD my God, how excellent is your greatness! you are clothed with majesty and splendor.
- 2 You wrap yourself with light as with a cloak and spread out the heavens like a curtain.
- 3 You lay the beams of your chambers in the waters above; you make the clouds your chariot; you ride on the wings of the wind.
- 4 You make the winds your messengers and flames of fire your servants.
- 5 You have set the earth upon its foundations, so that it never shall move at any time.
- 6 You covered it with the Deep as with a mantle; the waters stood higher than the mountains.
- 7 At your rebuke they fled; at the voice of your thunder they hastened away.
- 8 They went up into the hills and down to the valleys beneath, to the places you had appointed for them.
- 9 You set the limits that they should not pass; they shall not again cover the earth.

25 O LORD, how manifold are your works! in wisdom  
you have made them all; the earth is full of your  
creatures.

37b Hallelujah!

**Mark 10:35-45**

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to Jesus and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to

them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but 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 a ransom for many.”

## SERMON

Every time I see Dr. Bell for an injection in my back, he says the same thing. “Bee sting, Mr. Schneider.” He's warning me before he causes me some discomfort. I need to do the same with you today because the book of Job is going to cause us some discomfort. However much we might wish for it, the book of Job will not permit us a comfortable, placid, unchallenging faith.

Recall that we started out Job's story with a conversation between God and one of His employees, haSatan. God commented on Job's faithfulness, but haSatan argued that Job was only faithful because God had rewarded him with a comfortable life. “You scratched his back. It's no wonder he scratches yours,” haSatan maintained. To settle the matter, God permitted haSatan to just utterly destroy everything good in Job's life.

I called this the genius of the book of Job. Our Sixth

Century B.C. editor intentionally gives us an explanation of Job's trouble guaranteed to drive us nuts. Why would our editor put such a disturbing portrait of God in his book, and why has this disturbing book been included in the Canon as the inspired word of God since the mind of man runneth not to the contrary? Somewhere in this disturbing book there must be a pearl of great price, or it would have gone the way of the Gospel of Judas long ago.

The series of texts in the Lectionary skip over the entire middle part of the book, but we need to understand what happens there, at least in outline, before we look at today's text. Put on your running shoes, church. We're going to make a dash through it.

The text tells us that after Job's world collapsed around him, three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite, traveled to comfort him. Job was in such a state, that they didn't



even recognize him, and they were so overcome with his misery that “They sat with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him.” They did well in this, but things quickly go off the rails. After sitting with Job in his misery, Eliphaz speaks up and makes a singularly unhelpful observation.

‘Think now, who that was innocent ever perished?

Or where were the upright cut off?

Eliphaz is suggesting that Job **must** have done something wrong, or he wouldn’t be suffering. Job's suffering proves that Job can't be innocent. Lest Job insist that he has done nothing wrong, Eliphaz then conjures up an account of a meeting with a frightening dark spirit who told him:

“Can mortals be righteous before God?

Can human beings be pure before their Maker?

What a cruel thing to say! Blaming Job's calamity on some unspecified sin he must have committed would be like going into the hospital room of a lung cancer patient and asking if they had been a smoker!

I'd like to think none of us are guilty of that sort of cruelty, but we know that we are. Random suffering frightens us, and we seek desperately for an explanation of suffering. I shared with you once that every time I came down with a head cold, my father would badger me to find out when I went outside without a hat, because in dad's world, no one ever got a cold while wearing a hat. The suffering of others frightens us because the possibility of undeserved suffering frightens us. When we are frightened, we often speak in ways that will protect us rather than in ways which will comfort the sufferer. How often have we said to one who has lost an infant or child that "God needed an angel"? Such words always make it worse for the one who suf-

fers.

But Job has strength within him, and he is not putting up with Eliphaz or the spook he rode in on. He is in pain and doesn't need someone to conjure up ways that it is his fault. Job replies:

‘Those who withhold kindness from a friend  
forsake the fear of the Almighty.  
My companions are treacherous like a torrent-bed,  
like freshets that pass away,  
‘Teach me, and I will be silent;  
make me understand how I have gone  
wrong.

Next up was Bildad the Shuhite. Delightful fellow, Bildad. His advice to Job is to repent, even if you don't know what you are repenting of, because your present troubles may be the result of the sins of your fathers. “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge”, you might say. If you suffer, there must be a reason, in your behavior or in your an-

cestor's because, Bildad says:

‘Can papyrus grow where there is no marsh?

Can reeds flourish where there is no water?

I was thinking on the question of our responsibility for the sins of our fathers earlier in the month when we celebrated Columbus Day, perhaps the most ill-conceived of our holidays. Each year a predominantly Protestant country celebrates a Catholic explorer who never set foot in North America, did not believe in its existence, and who kicked off a genocide of the people who did live on the continent he never set foot on and didn't believe existed. There was a picture circulating on Facebook with a caption suggesting that we celebrate Columbus Day by walking into someone else's house and telling them we live there now. I agree. It's a stupid holiday. 1492 wasn't the year America was discovered. It's the year the sea pirates arrived<sup>1</sup>.

Nonetheless, Bildad raises a good question. To what

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<sup>1</sup> Kurt Vonnegut

extent are we morally compelled to make reparation for the sins of our fathers? I discovered in my genealogical research that one of my great grandfathers owned a slave. Does that sin impose upon me a need to make reparation? Bildad has a valid insight.

After Bildad's speech, Job becomes dispirited. What he wants, most of all, is a law suit against God. He and God had a bargain. The bargain was this: I do right, and you protect me from harm, just as haSatan suggested. This is the irony of the book of Job: Job and his friends all share this idea of a barter religion. Job's misery isn't the way the barter was intended to go, for Job kept his end of the bargain and it appears that God has failed to keep His. Job becomes dispirited because he realizes that there is no way such a law suit could be prosecuted. God's power and his are too disparate.

... but how can a mortal be just before God?  
If one wished to contend with him,

one could not answer him once in a thousand.  
He is wise in heart, and mighty in strength  
—who has resisted him, and succeeded?

If you decide God is behaving unjustly, to whom **would** you appeal? We think of the “patience of Job”, but the reality is much different. Job’s patience is wearing thin.

The next friend to speak is Zophar the Naamathite.  
From such comfort keep me far away!

Then Zophar the Naamathite answered:  
‘Should a multitude of words go unanswered,  
and should one full of talk be vindicated?  
Should your babble put others to silence,  
and when you mock, shall no one shame  
you?

For you say, “My conduct is pure,  
and I am clean in God’s sight.”

Marvelous. Just marvelous. Job’s suffering is beyond human comprehension, but because he cries out in pain that he did nothing to deserve it, that’s just further evidence of what an arrogant sinner he is. Why are

these friends of Job turning from comforting him to beating him up?

To uncover the pearl of great price contained within Job, I need to ask you a question: when you approach another, how do you decide what course you should follow? I think we can agree that swinging at a stranger with a meat cleaver isn't the right approach, but how do we determine the right approach?

I'd like to say that we do so by reference to the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, but we don't, really. We follow social conventions. We smile. We extend a hand. We exchange pleasantries. Our social conventions are more than adequate to permit us to traverse a casual meeting with a stranger, or to re-establish contact with a friend or family member and that's why we rely so much upon them – they are useful and functional.

I would suggest, though, that our social conventions won't take us very far when we meet real suffering in

another. In the face of a serious loss our social conventions fail us and we are left with nothing to lean against and no meaningless pleasantries to hide behind. The friends of Job behave badly, and, like much bad behavior, the genesis of their bad action is fear. We are truly frightened of calamities of the size suffered by Job. By their suggestion that God was punishing Job for his sins, they can put some distance between themselves and Job and relieve their fears. But by acting to protect themselves, they magnify Job's suffering. Anyone who has suffered a serious loss will testify how hurtful attempts to "make you feel better" from well-meaning friends can be.

When we encounter pain, suffering, sadness and disease in another, we must reach far beyond social conventions. I'm convinced that this long reach isn't possible for mere human beings. I think opening your heart and making yourself vulnerable to the suffering of



another is the action of the Holy Spirit. I think this is why so few of the “non-affiliated” group we discussed last week, those who describe themselves as atheist, agnostic or “nothing special” are found working around soup kitchens and Hospice.

After all the arguments, the recriminations, the accusations, the rebuffs, God enters the fray, and what He says is not comforting, either.

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind:

“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

Gird up your loins like a man,  
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

Who determined its measurements – surely you know!

Our Sixth Century B.C. editor now has us firmly in his clever snare. We know the reasons behind Job’s suf-

fering — it was a demonstration to haSatan of Job's faithfulness. Job doesn't know the cause of his suffering, and throughout he has cried to God for an explanation. Instead of an explanation, he gets sarcasm? But is that really what he gets? What has our anonymous editor created for us?

On our one hand, we have what we wish our faith to be – a barter religion in which we do for God so that God will do for us. “I will proclaim your Majesty, Lord,” we say, “and you will extend your strong hand in protection of me and mine.”

On our other hand, we have the words of the Larger Catechism:

Q. 7. What is God?

A. God is a Spirit, in and of himself infinite in being, glory, blessedness, and perfection; all-sufficient, eternal, unchangeable, **incomprehensible**, everywhere present, almighty; knowing all things, most wise, most holy, most just,

most merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth.

Job is right that he will not prevail in any law suit where his opponent is infinite in being, glory, blessedness and perfection. Job's friends, however, are wrong in imagining that they can perceive or define God's righteousness. Rather than confess that, they seek to bind God to a barter religion of "I scratch your back, you scratch mine" in which it is Job's fault if his back itches. If that really was the nature of our covenant with God, why did Jesus die in agony?

This, at last, is the pearl of great price which we sought. When we attempt to assign qualities to God, even positive qualities like "good", we have seated ourselves in judgment of God. If we say God is good, and our experience teaches us that there is much in the world which is not good, then we must admit a power of "not good" in opposition to God. Just like that, up

jumps the devil. We are saying that because our distant ancestors, Adam and Eve, ate of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, that we now stand in parity with God, able to judge the good from the evil. When we demand of God this or that, when we stand in judgment of God for his failures to do what we ask we have forgotten just who we are speaking of.

God answers us from a whirlwind

“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

Gird up your loins like a man,

I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

Who determined its measurements – surely you know!

God is not your fishing buddy. God is God. There is none like Him. It is this sense of awe, of fear, the need to fall upon our faces when addressing our God which

we have lost in egalitarian America. We can't barter with the Almighty. We can't view our relationship as "You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours." Instead, we are instructed with all solemnity to "Be silent and know that I am God."

AMEN

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

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