



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 22, OCTOBER 3, 2021
JOB 1:1, 2:1-10; PSALM 26; HEBREWS 1:1-4, 2:5-12; MARK 10:2-16

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT SCRIPTURES (ON DIVORCE, SUFFERING, AND EVIL)

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.

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 his 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 receive 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.

My homiletics professor in seminary was a fine Southern Baptist preacher who said he had it easy compared to us Episcopalians—he

could preach each week on one scripture passage of his choosing, while we lectionary-based folks always got four scriptures, not of

our choosing. His instruction to us as neophyte homileticians was choose one of the four and focus there, instead of rambling on about all four. And his corollary charge was to be courageous enough to choose the most difficult scripture at hand.

For the most part, I've lived by that wisdom for nigh on twenty years now. The problem today is that I find the readings from Job and Mark's gospel equally difficult, or at least comparably problematic. Leaving either untended seems a dereliction of duty. I feel obliged to say something about both, knowing that either could serve as a sole prompt for several sermons and never exhaust the gleanings. Such is the gift of challenging scriptures.

Let's begin with the gospel and Jesus' treatment of divorce. He does not dispute the fact that the law allowed for a man to divorce his wife if he finds something "objectionable" about her. The problem was there was no consensus on what was deemed "objectionable," and Jesus admonishes that hardness of heart is perilous ground on which to stand in relationships of import. We know that in Jesus' day a woman divorced would have been spurned in shame by her family and that of her husband, likely by her children too, leaving her with little resource beyond street begging and prostitution. And

Jesus says, beware of making decisions from a place of a hardened heart.

That he pivots to marriage (rather than bearing down on divorce), citing the Genesis story in a way that some have interpreted as Jesus prohibiting divorce altogether, or worse, as denunciation of homosexuality given the heteronormative reference. Scriptures can be proof-texted to justify just about any position. Let's be clear: Jesus never addressed the matter of sexual orientation anywhere in the gospels, and his reference here was familiar and I'd like to think heart-warming. Positive, not prescriptive. We have a different understanding of human sexuality—and thankfully a broader one, and we are still learning and unfolding into the fullness of understanding of the beauty of our beings. Let me say I am sorry for the Church's complicity in the harm caused to many of you. We can and must do better.

Let me also say that I see Jesus' words here, not as pronouncement—thou shalt not..., but rather as a plea—do not let your hardness of heart hurt others. The truth is, friends, marriage is hard work, and sometimes it doesn't work out. That is not a frivolous statement; it is intended as a pastoral one. There are plenty of ways a marriage can implode, or just die on the vine.

Marriage is hard work. I'm 36 years into a marriage with Kathy without whom it's hard to imagine my life. I am tremendously grateful for her. But there have been plenty of challenges along the way, and the one thing we know is that the future will not be immune from more challenges. There are no guarantees, and Kathy and I know that it is by God grace, and often in spite of our failings (and mostly mine), that we have come this far. One day at a time, sweet Jesus.

So let me say whatever path you are on—single, married, divorced, widowed, whatever your path—be gentle with yourself and those in your life. Harden not your heart. If you do not transform your pain, you will transmit it.

Wisdom for us all to heed.

Okay, so now to Job, shall we?

Victor Hugo once said “Tomorrow, if all literature was to be destroyed and it was left to me to retain one work only, I should save [the Book of] Job.”

Virginia Woolf once wrote, “I read the book of Job last night. I don't think God comes out well in it.”

If taken at face value, read literally, God is little more than monstrous deity, toying with an innocent man in some cosmic wager with Satan.

But Wisdom literature, like Job, is not meant to be taken literally—we have to work harder to mine its riches, and there is good evidence that this opening to the book is lifted from an ancient folk tale. We would do well to remember that folk tales are not usually “true” on the outside, but always offer truth and beauty on the inside.

So let's set aside for a moment the notion that God and Satan are swaggering around a chess board with human pieces. Such a simplistic image is at best a red herring.

The question presented by the Book of Job plumbs a deeper well of human experience—that of innocent suffering. Is it possible to sustain one's spiritual devotion in relationship to God, one's faith, in the wake of catastrophic loss? Or to say it a different way, is religion nothing more than either carrot or stick—on the one hand promising good things to those who are obedient, or on the other hand, threatening fiery punishment for those who fail to comply?

The hope and witness borne in Job is that religious faith need not be reduced to such a carrot-or-stick quid pro quo. His wife and friends beckon him to just such a reductive life. His losses are so hyperbolic that they seem hardly possible—the death of all seven sons and three daughters, all his herds and

flocks, his home, and he is afflicted with boils covering his body.

And yet he refuses to curse God, to harden his heart, and becomes a paragon of hope for us all, taking a shard of pottery to prick his inflamed skin—for relief, yes, but beneath the surface lies a deeper truth and beauty to his life that no amount of suffering can blemish—that he is beloved of God, and that is balm enough to heal and to sustain the relationship.

Hyperbole and folk tales aside, my friends, no one gets out of this life without suffering—we each define what is considered innocent

suffering and how much is considered catastrophic. There is no guarantee for the gift of faith in the face of such things—so be gentle with yourself and others as they make their way—but sit with Job, painful as that may be, and listen to his whispers of wisdom, and maybe, just maybe, you will find the balm of your belovedness sufficient to heal and hope as well. Therein lies the gift of faith—the sustaining relationship with God that lies beneath the pockmarked surface of carrot-or-stick religion. It is often with the shards of a broken existence strewn about that we scrape our way into new awareness and new life.



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