

October 14th

Readings for the day: OLD TESTAMENT: Job 23: 1 - 9, 16 - 17

PSALM 22: 1 - 15

NEW TESTAMENT: Hebrews 4: 12 - 16

GOSPEL: Mark 10: 17 - 31

Job is in interesting book, and Job is an interesting fellow. Though we often use phrases like someone having the patience of Job (and it was the epistle of James that first coined that phrase) Job, in this tale, is far from a patient person.

Searching for the reasons his life has turned to dust,
 he is impatient with his friends who bring empty answers
 and with God who seems silent on the matter of Job's suffering.

Job has lost everything he loves and values, from his children to his home
 to his livestock,

and he can identify absolutely nothing that he has done that has to deserve any of his pain. In the conventional wisdom of the time, bad things only happen to bad people. It is our actions alone that bring our suffering.

Job's friends insist on that kind of tit for tat God,
 but Job hasn't done anything at all to anger God so greatly
 that it would bring such great suffering.

All of his searching for answers, for meaning, for hope
 have brought him to the place we find him this morning:

he would rather die than go on
 and he curses not just the day he was born, but the day he was conceived.

All of it was worth nothing, if this is what has happened.

Job is asking, about his own life, the question we all ask one time or another:
 why do bad things happen to good people?

Why the cancer; why the child born broken, why the car accident,
 why the addiction; why the senseless violence. Why go on at all.

I want to step back a moment and talk about the history behind this respected story that comes from the biblical wisdom tradition. Wisdom is a category of writings that explore life and how to live. Most of the wisdom writings in the Old Testament have to do with how to live a good and successful life. We might call those writings conventional wisdom.

The tale of Job fits into an entirely different category of wisdom--a more philosophical kind of wisdom. Wisdom as philosophy takes on the questions that conventional wisdom can't answer. In this case, the question is why do bad things, terrible things, happen to very good people. The book of Job comes from that category of wisdom, the kind of wisdom that doesn't have to do with having a good and successful life, but the wisdom that we use to find meaning in life.

Some background on the book of Job:

The book of Job was composed around the years 500 600 BC, but its roots lie in a regional folk tale that is much older.

The folk tale which the writer of Job has adapted comes from middle eastern oral traditions, and the Biblical book of Job was composed around the year 500 or 600 BC. So, we approach this story with a few things to keep in mind:

First, the book was composed during a time of national suffering. The Jewish kingdoms have been destroyed and the people taken far from home, into exile. They have lost everything.

Second, at this time Job's story was adapted by the Jews, satan had not yet become an entity at war with God. The satan is still one of the heavenly assembly who council God. Here, in this story, satan is a plot devise, not symbol of all that seeks to destroy good and stands in opposition to God's purposes.

Finally, this is another of a few examples in the Bible where a regional folk tale that deals with conventional themes is tweaked to address a theological themes.

With the tweaking, a story that is about how life is,

becomes a story about how God is. As the story is reframed, our lives are reframed, but into a larger frame of reference; our stories themselves become part of a bigger story that is told on a universal scale. Our stories are woven into God's story.

This fall we will read portions of Job for 4 Sundays in a row, this is the second week. Last week we read the story set up. That is the part of the book that relies on the folk tale; the ending of the book returns to the folk tale and Job's life is again good.

It the major part of the book, the middle part of the book that is the theological work is done.

This is where Job's friends, in an attempt to help him get his life back assert that he must surely have offended God in some way, for all this misfortune to have visited him.

His children dead, his home gone, his livestock and livelihood stolen,

Job's three friends come to comfort him. First, they sit for 7 days beside their

grieving friend. In silence Job sits, and his friends heap dust and ashes on their own heads in solidarity with his suffering.

On the eight day Job finally speaks, and what he says is a heresy: God done this to me for no reason. I am a good man. I don't deserve this.

Job's friends are shocked by what he says, and they respond to his question with conventional wisdom: if you do the right things, things will go the right way and life will be good. So, you must have done something wrong. Confess it and God will fix everything, and your life will be good again.

Pretty much the whole first half of the book is Job's friends trying to convince him that he brought this suffering on himself—if only he had been more faithful, been a better behaved man none of this would have happened. All he has to do is confess his sin and the misery will all go away.

But Job knows that's not the answer.

Which doesn't mean he knows what the answer really is.

He is ready to give it all up. In his mind there is no answer that can explain his suffering. In our reading today Job's despair is so great that he never wants to see the sun rise on him another day and he not only curses the day he was born, he curses the day he was conceived. It has all been for nothing.

That is Job's story, so far. We'll pick it up again next week.

We also have today the story of the rich young man who is seeking something called eternal life. He believes, rightly, that it is his birthright. Eternal life is the birthright of us all.

But he believes that he will get this prize called eternal life by doing all the right things. In that way, he is a little like Job's friends, believing that it is by good deeds God's blessing is gained. That by his own efforts alone, he can enter the kingdom.

So there we'll leave them for today. 2 men, asking questions for which there is no easy answer.

Job, certain that his misfortune isn't punishment from God; but not yet able to see a better answer.

The rich young man, so in love with his own wealth, his own power, so in love with the idea that it is by what he does that he will inherit the kingdom,
that there is no room for God's grace to be a part of his life at all.

We are left only with their confusion and their questions: Job and his question:
why do bad things happen to God people.

And the disciples with theirs: Lord, if entering the kingdom is as hard as a camel going through the eye of a needle (which is to say, impossibly hard);
who then can be saved? Who *can* inherit eternal life?