

Job 38: 1-7, 34-41 & Mark 10: 35-45

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 24 B

October 20, 2024

The Rev. Katherine Bush

People say that there are no stupid questions; there are some audacious ones. James and John have got a lot of nerve, and so does our friend Job. If you've got questions, it's good company all around this week. Let's be grateful that they are willing to say out loud what a lot of us wonder about quietly. Though the readings skipped over Job's list of questions, you just need to know that after thirty-seven chapters of suffering, Job laments that his righteous life has not protected him from pain and loss. Then, we get to see James and John pull Jesus aside to ask for preferential seating in the glory days to come. It's easy to roll our eyes at James and John and their striving, grasping requests. And we might hope that the depth of Job's despair is something we never have to contend with ourselves. But, of course, we understand that these old stories about humans and God are also always stories about us and God. And though we might be loath to admit it, more than a few of us know that if we saw a chance to get the good seats up front we'd go for it just like James and John. And most of us also know all too well the frustration that Job confesses - that in the back of our minds we think or at least hope that if we just follow the rules and try to be good we can avoid the worst slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. These guys have some bold questions, but like other kids in the classroom, some of us are glad they said what they did so that we can lean in and hear whatever answers might be coming.

Before we get to any so-called answers, it's relevant, I think, to see where these conversations are happening. They're not academic, philosophical ponderings, these aren't hypotheticals posed at a lively dinner table for debate. James and John and Jesus are walking on the road up to Jerusalem, the threat of violence hangs in the air. Jesus has just told them about the terrible days that lie in store for him and for them. And Job? He is sitting on his heap of ashes, scraping his sores with a shard of pottery; he's been alternately silent, weeping, and finally shouting at God for a while now. All of these questions come from inside the whirlwind of the all too present world. And so again, just like we know something about the desires that drive the questions, we also know a little something about a world that feels overwhelming that prompts this need to know - too much chaos, too much violence, too little certainty.

Even thousands of years later, though we might be tempted to say we've got nothing in common with any of these guys, we ought to pause and acknowledge how we fall into the same traps. Upon hearing about the horror to come for Jesus and his followers, James and John start scrambling for something that feels like safety - good positions and status, proximity to power. They want the grandeur or at least to be able to grasp hold of the grandeur-to-come as if that will help them endure the days between. And Job who has lost everything - everything: home, wealth, children, respect, security - starts his dialogue with God arguing the point that he did everything he was supposed to do and it didn't save him.

We too show up with our striving and our justifications and with our audacious questions because the world offers some pretty unanswerable days. It really is understandable, isn't it? In the face of confusion and hurt and violence and loss and the swirl of bad news on so many fronts, our human responses are pretty consistent over the centuries. We reach out to grab hold of anything we think might keep us afloat, anything that will give us a sense of control in a world that feels out of control. We want to claim the highest rung we can reach on the ladder of success or if that's not available then the high ground of self-righteousness. We want to imagine that we are not so small that we will be batted around and battered by the storms of life.

And from that uphill road to Jerusalem and from the very center of the whirlwind, we hear back a pretty consistent answer. “You don’t know what you’re asking.” “Who are you that darkens counsel without knowledge?” It sounds harsh, at first, especially from the quicksand we feel we are standing in, but let’s sit with this response for a few moments. What James and John and Job and all of us eavesdroppers are being reminded of is, indeed, our smallness, our limitations. James and John don’t know what they’re asking, and they don’t know how difficult the cup will be to drink and how frightening the baptism will feel when it comes. Job is being asked to look up from his tragedy and to remember how vast the world around him really is and how it goes on with or without him. Both of these conversations are conversations about scale and how we humans struggle to remember how much, or rather how little space we actually take up.

And really, I understand that this sounds dismissive, yet this reminder that we are small can also come to us as a profound gift. The whirlwind and the feeling of overwhelm is real - especially when we believe that we are responsible for somehow reining it all in, in charge of making sure hurricanes and elections go one way and not another, and when we believe that we can make illness and pain stay at bay by our good behavior and crossing our fingers. Being cut down to size serves to remind us that we are actually not responsible for figuring everything out. And with that in mind, we can actually tend to the things which are ours to handle and manage - which is to say: our hearts, our kindnesses, our choices, our acts of courage, even our faithfulness. When we are aware of our relatively small stature, we can take comfort in the knowledge that we only have to plant the seeds we can plant and share the small gifts that we can share, and that our work is then enough and that we are also enough.

It’s true that none of our petitioners today get a satisfactory answer to the actual question they are posing, some things really cannot be known or understood. Some questions are frustratingly unanswerable. James and John don’t get comfy chairs in the kingdom. They get invited to walk into some very hard days, and they are called to serve rather than to reach for more. Job doesn’t get an explanation for why things aren’t more fair, according to his standards of the word. He does get to hear a whisper of the morning stars’ song and a chance to see that while it’s a frightening freedom, he is a free creature in a magnificent and beautiful creation. Notice though because it matters, that Jesus is on the road with James and John and that God is present and speaking to Job from inside that very storm.

Just like our friends here, we may be flummoxed by a world gone mad some days, and we can be brave enough to ask God tough questions about why things are the way - that comes with the territory, as does wanting to get a toehold in a shifting landscape. These are time-honored human responses, and we’re in good company when we shake our fists or wish things could be just a little easier.

And God’s time-honored response writ again and again in story after story and day after day is to say something like this: I’m inviting you to take your place in the world with me, your spot may be a little smaller than you might like, but you’ll be better off in this wild and gorgeous and dangerous world when you remember you’re not here to tame it. Can you love this little life of yours even when you can’t run the whole show? Can you believe that you are loved even on the uphill road? Because these two questions are really the answers. Can you love this little life of yours even when you can’t control it? Can you believe that you are loved even inside the whirlwind?