

Epworth Chapel on the Green
June 24, 2012
Pentecost 4
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Job 38:1-11, 16-18
Psalm 107
2 Corinthians 5:14-21
Mark 4:35-41

Our Scripture lessons this morning have some thematic connections, but I want to focus most of my attention on the passage from Job, and on Job's experience.

Of course, the passage drops us down into the middle of a conversation that has been going on for some time, so we need a little context to help orient us in the discussion.

You may recall that Job is described at the beginning of the book as a "blameless and upright man," a man of "complete integrity," a man who "fears God and shuns evil."

The book then goes on to describe how Job suffers incredible loss. Although a man of great wealth, he loses everything he owns. His entire family, except for his wife, is tragically killed and taken from him. And then his health is taken from him, and he is reduced to scraping boils from his broken body while sitting on a pile of ashes.

A good portion of the story then reveals how Job (and his friends) try to make sense of it all. From Job's perspective, it doesn't make sense. There seems to be such a *randomness* to it all, an unpredictability that borders on *chaos*. For Job has lived his life in radical obedience to God. He has sought to honor God in every area of his life.

And the suffering and tragedy that now befalls him seems not only unfair, but perhaps even *capricious*. In the face of inexplicable suffering and tragedy, Job feels like a bit of a victim. Life for him has become a wild ride in a boat called chaos.

None of us has experienced tragedy of the magnitude that Job suffered. But we have (and do) know what it means to experience suffering and tragedy and heartache in our lives. We know what it means to live in a world where things happen to us that seem so random, so arbitrary, so unpredictable. We feel victimized by inexplicable tragedy and suffering in our lives. We don't understand how our attempts at obedience and faithfulness to God can be met with heartache, suffering, and disappointment. Sometimes we find ourselves at a place in life where it feels like we're riding the waves of chaos, and we're not sure if we will make it through the storm.

In such times, is there a word from the Lord, or a word from Job, that can help us?

Well, here in Job, God doesn't so much give Job an "answer" as He does a "response." It seems to me that Job and his friends are focusing primarily on trying to make sense of personal and individual suffering (and understandably so!). But here God invites Job to see himself and his problems within the larger context of a wonderfully made, yet ultimately unfathomable, creation. Rather than answer Job, God invites Job into a world that is more complex and puzzling than he has previously imagined.

One aspect of this discussion involves the sea, and the chaos of the waters. The passage from Job, the Psalm, and the Gospel lesson today might all be summarized by the theme: "chaos is mine, saith the Lord."

In the ancient world, the sea was often seen as the place of chaos, the place where life and existence was often threatened. And even today this image can be at work in us. Who of us doesn't cower a little at the thought of the power of the sea as it devours ships, land, and people? Have we forgotten the Tsunami of 2004, or the images of the sea as it laid waste to Japan not that long ago?

But here in Job, and in Psalm 107, and in Mark's Gospel, the waters of chaos have been tamed by a merciful God. Here, the capital "C" chaos becomes just chaos -- a real power that retains a place in God's world, but a power that God has "fenced" in. So while unfair suffering and tragedy is as "awe-full" as the creation

itself, as a given part of creation everywhere it is not an aberration in the world God has made.

Ultimately, though, this "answer" or "response" does not totally satisfy either Job or us. Neither Job nor we will likely find in God's words here an "answer" to human suffering. That's because the book of Job is not really a book about divine pastoral care, but about divine perspective and human wonder. *Rather than providing an answer to the problem of suffering, Job is advised to recognize his human limitations, and to trust that God will take care of what Job and others cannot know.* (cf. Dan Simundson, *WorkingPreacher.org*, June 24, 2012).

For me, the turning point for Job comes four chapters later, when he does this very thing. God shows up on the scene, and Job comes to a realization, a sort of epiphany moment about his finite wisdom and his human limitations. He says: "I had heard about You before, but now I have seen You with my own eyes" (42:5).

It's almost as if Job says, "we've been talking about all of this and trying to understand all of this as if it were merely an academic exercise. God, and the world God has made, cannot be reduced to our intellectual gyrations, and we are proud and arrogant to try to do so."

And there is one other turning point for me in all of this. A key point in trying to understand and make sense of the suffering and tragedy that often confronts us in life. It comes in the Gospel lesson.

Jesus and the disciples are in the boat, and the violent storm arises. The disciples are terrified, and Jesus silences the storm. But he is present with them. And as he muzzles the storm, he points forward to a day when he will hang on a Cross. And on that day God doesn't explain suffering -- God *participates* in it, and God takes it into himself.

As we come to the Lord's table this morning, I wish I had better answers than I do. I wish that I knew how to explain the mystery of how our attempts at obedience and faithfulness in life are sometimes met with inexplicable suffering and tragedy and heartbreak and disappointment.

I don't. All I know is that the One who offers to meet you here at this table is the One who learned obedience through what he *suffered*. The One who meets you here at this table is the One who *is present with you* in the boat as you fear you may be going under. The One who meets you here is the One who endured senseless and inexplicable suffering in response to pure mercy and love and grace.

So open your hearts and your hands. Come with faith. Let him speak peace into your storm. Receive the grace he offers you. Then carry on.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

