

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 24, Year B – October 20, 2024

“God’s Ways Are Not Our Ways...”

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ST. PAUL’S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

VERGENNES, VERMONT

Job 38:1-7, (34-41) | Psalm 104:1-9, 25, 37b | Hebrews 5:1-10 | Mark 10:35-45

The Virginia Cavaliers’ coach announced his retirement this week. At the press conference, Coach Bennett said, “I’ve been here for 15 years as the head coach, and I thought it would be a little longer, to be honest, but...this position has been on loan, and it’s time to give it back.” Then, he quoted a missionary who said, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” Bennett was giving up his position to dedicate himself to his family, his players, and to God.

In the verses leading to today’s reading from the Gospel according to Mark, Jesus told the disciples that they would be going up to Jerusalem, where the Son of Man, whom they knew was Jesus, would be condemned to death by religious leaders. He would be handed over to the Gentiles, who would mock him, spit upon him, flog him, and kill him, and after three days he will rise again. Two disciples, James and John, decided that if Jesus was going to die and rise again in glory, they might as well reserve a seat. The brothers asked to be seated on either side of Jesus in heaven. Jesus wasn’t sure they understood that they were volunteering to be spat upon, flogged, and killed. Were they being brave and selfless or self-absorbed? I always assumed the latter, because earlier Jesus had caught the disciples arguing about which one of them was greatest, but it’s hard to know for sure. What is certain is that Jesus could not grant their request. Only God could.

Consistently through the Gospel, the disciples missed the mark. Jesus asked them to leave their possessions behind, even their families, which many did, but they still struggled to

understand this difficult teaching that Jesus would rise in glory to take away the sins of the world. His death would make us whole again. The disciples accepted his teaching, though they didn't fully understand it. It appears they were ready to give what they could not keep to gain what they could not lose.

Today's Old Testament reading is about a man who lost everything to gain a new relationship with God. He did not ask for any favors, like James and John. Job was humble and righteous and so, the story goes, God blessed him with many children, livestock, and servants. Job wasn't perfect, but he atoned for his own sins with burnt offerings, that is, temple sacrifices. He also made sacrifices on his children's behalf, in case they even had any negative thoughts about God. Job checked all the boxes and the fact that he rested in God's favor made him an ideal test case for the adversary.

In Hebrew, the accuser or adversary was *ha satan*, from a verb that means "to obstruct, oppose." Most translators give the adversary the name of Satan. Now, before we go any further, erase your mental image of a guy with red skin, pointy nose, chin and ears, and an arrow tail, holding a pitchfork. Instead, imagine a prosecutor who seeks judgment. Everything the adversary did was done with God's permission. God agreed to the adversary's request for a test of Job's faithfulness.

God asked the adversary what he had been doing, and he gave a vague answer, "Oh, just going back and forth from earth." God said, "have you considered my servant Job?" God knew Job was living a blameless life. The adversary was skeptical. "Of course he's good. You've rewarded him for every good thing he does. Would Job love you if you didn't shower him with blessings?" God allowed the adversary to test this hypothesis. First, Job lost his

livestock and servants in three separate attacks. Even after Job learned that four of his children had died, he mourned, but did not blame God.

In the next chapter of the book, God asked the adversary again what he was doing, and he gave another vague answer, “Oh, just going back and forth from earth, walking up and down” God said again, “have you considered my servant Job...” This time, it seemed like the tables had turned. God wanted the adversary to admit defeat, but instead, Satan escalated. This time, he wanted Job to be physically harmed. Job’s wife could not understand how a loving God would allow her husband to be harmed. Even when Job’s body was covered in loathsome sores, he would not speak against God. Even more interesting is the fact that Job didn’t question his own way of living. He was sure that he was blameless and righteous, not because he was sure he was always right, but because his character has been formed by the habits of his righteous life.

Job spent his whole life acting with mercy, justice, righteousness, and love, and in this one decisive moment, a moment of great suffering, he did not step off the righteous path. “Do you still persist in your integrity?” his wife asked him. Job opened his mouth, not to deny the words of the Holy One, but to end his suffering. With God as bystander, if not accomplice, the adversary continued to push Job until suffering broke his spirit.

When we read the sequence of events in Job’s life, every new tragedy feels like a sucker punch. Even if we cannot relate to the loss of livestock and servants, we can at least try to imagine the impact of losing four children. We can’t help but feel pity for Job as he scraped his sores with a shard of pottery. Such misery. Such despair. Where was God’s mercy?

Job's friends appeared to help him and they did exactly the right thing in the beginning. They sat with him and were present with him in his grief, but then they did exactly the wrong thing. They took on the role of the adversary. They dissected Job's life and accused him and criticized him and blamed him. Job rallied and reclaimed his innocence, "For I know that my redeemer lives and that in the end he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another." Job kept arguing with his friends, trying to build a case for his innocence, from Chapter 15 until Chapter 38, over twenty-three chapters. God did not show compassion or offer explanations, but instead helped Job to regain perspective.

God was not a friend with whom Job could argue his innocence. No, the Lord answered out of a whirlwind, "remember who I am." "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" God asked Job if he could "bind the chains of the Pleiades, or loose the cords of Orion?" then asked, "Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, so that a flood of waters may cover you?" God reminded Job of the Leviathan and the Behemoth, two fantastic beasts with incredible strength.

God put Job in his place, saying in effect, remember who you are. Remember who I am. Turn away from thinking about yourself and your friends, turn back toward me. Forget about who is right and who is wrong, forget about blaming. God offered perspective here, but not full knowledge. Jesus offered the same to his disciples.

Job went from being a person who did all the right things to becoming a person who experienced God in a new way. Did Job have to suffer? Maybe yes. Maybe no. The authors of this book seem to be teaching us that there are some things we can never know, because

we are not God.

Satan took away Job's livelihood, his family, his health, his friends, his hope—all things that were on loan from God. When Job humbly admitted that he had uttered what he did not understand, "things too wonderful for me, which I did not know," God returned his life to him, a life Job could never lose. In addition to "we cannot know what God knows," Job's story teaches us another important lesson: "we cannot save ourselves." Only God can do that.