

October 21, 2012

Today's readings offer a stern warning to anyone who thinks they have God figured out. The problem usually reveals itself when we imagine that God thinks and acts like us. What we are about to hear are stories framed in irony so that we get a new perspective on the fact that God is God... and we are not!

Job 38: 1-7, 34-41

If you recall from last Sunday, Job demanded justice from God. He was convinced of his innocence and demanded a face-to-face meeting with the Creator where, he was certain, he would win. What follows is one of the angriest, majestic statement of God's powerful love for all creation... and God's refusal to let anyone pidgeon-hole God.

- ¹And now, finally, GOD answered Job from the eye of a violent storm. He said:
²“Why do you confuse the issue? Why do you talk without knowing what you’re talking about?
³Pull yourself together, Job! Up on your feet! Stand tall! I have some questions for you, and I want some straight answers.
⁴Where were you when I created the earth? Tell me, since you know so much!
⁵Who decided on its size? Certainly you’ll know that! Who came up with the blueprints and measurements?
⁶How was its foundation poured, and who set the cornerstone,
⁷While the morning stars sang in chorus and all the angels shouted praise?
³⁴“Can you get the attention of the clouds, and commission a shower of rain?
³⁵Can you take charge of the lightning bolts and have them report to you for orders?
³⁶“Who do you think gave weather-wisdom to the ibis, and storm-savvy to the rooster?
³⁷Does anyone know enough to number all the clouds or tip over the rain barrels of heaven
³⁸When the earth is cracked and dry, the ground baked hard as a brick?
³⁹“Can you teach the lioness to stalk her prey and satisfy the appetite of her cubs
⁴⁰As they crouch in their den, waiting hungrily in their cave?
⁴¹And who sets out food for the ravens when their young cry to God, fluttering about because they have no food?

Mark 10: 42-45

These verses are Jesus' answer to the request of James and John to be seated next to him in heaven. They thought they knew Jesus and arrogantly awaited being honoured. The answer they got was most certainly shocking and humiliating. They are reminded, in these verses that they have had their perspective wrong for a long time.

- ⁴²Jesus got them together to settle things down. “You’ve observed how godless rulers throw their weight around,” he said, “and when people get a little power how quickly it

goes to their heads. ⁴³It's not going to be that way with you. Whoever wants to be great must become a servant. ⁴⁴Whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave. ⁴⁵That is what the Son of Man has done: He came to serve, not to be served—and then to give away his life in exchange for many who are held hostage.”

Sermon – “Where were you? A lesson in humility.”

Some years ago, at the annual meeting of Manitoba & North Western Ontario Conference of UCC we were in the middle of a debate on a subject I don't recall.

The President recognized a male minister standing at the microphone.

He began with: “I want to speak on behalf of women...”

Whatever he was saying, the reaction was swift – woman after woman stood and shouted, “You don't speak for me!” until the U of W gym vibrated with the sound of indignant women.

Job thought he “knew” God just as James and John presumed to “know” Jesus.

The reaction – like it was for those women – was swift and surgically decisive!

Professor Kathryn Schifferdecker – Luther Seminary writes:

We want God to apologize for all of Job's suffering. We want God to be at least, well, *comforting*. Instead, in the words of William Safire: “It's as if God appears in a tie-dyed T-shirt emblazoned with the words ‘Because I'm God, That's Why.’”

This is not the answer that Job (or we) expected from God. God speaks of freedom and grace rather than reward and retribution. Job is the only passenger on this grand tour of the cosmos, and through it, God invites him (and us) to see the world from a God's-eye point of view and to delight in its beauty and freedom as God does. It is not, in a conventional sense, very comforting. These speeches of God at the end of the book of Job accomplish something profound. They move Job out of his endless cycle of grief into life again.

Both of these passages are built around the literary tool of irony.

The use of words to convey the opposite of their literal meaning; a statement or situation where the meaning is contradicted by the appearance or presentation of the idea.

“It is a fitting **irony** that under Richard Nixon, *launder* became a dirty word.” (William Zinsser)

God addresses Job in power and might and tells him justice is not fair.

Jesus tells the disciples that power and honour will come from humble service.

In both cases human expectations of the circumstances are turned on their ear.

Why?

Because we are asked to look at the situations from a different perspective.

Job is not rejected by God – nor are James and John by Jesus => they are the object of “divine re-education.”

They are invited/forced to look at the world from Gods’ point of view.

Like Job – you and I mostly function on the expectation that life should be fair – that people get what they deserve as a result of their actions.

We also expect that if we do good we should be rewarded – if we sacrifice in our own lives we should get positive attention.

We don’t have to look any further than the dude who gave away his ticket to the Justin Bieber concert after he and his daughter had seen part of the show.

Pray tell, how did he find all those media types at the door of the MTS Centre to get an on-air interview???

Rolf Jacobson, a NT professor at Luther Seminary writes:

What is clear to the reader of this story – but is not clear to the disciples, who are characters in Mark’s story – is that the disciples think they know who Jesus is and why he has come. But they really don’t get it. Not fully.

And because of that, they do not know what it means to follow Jesus.

The irony that underpins these two stories results on a failure of perspective.

We don’t see the world as God does.

We are guilty of “anthropomorphism” = trying to make God like us.

To limit God to our human sensibilities, biases, pettiness.

Our perspective.

– ***n***

1. A way of regarding situations, facts, etc., and judging their relative importance.

2. The proper or accurate point of view or the ability to see it;
objectively: *try to get some perspective on your troubles*.

Our inability to see the world as God does results in these rather nasty and humbling confrontations => God = judgment => God = love.

Expecting your faith to give you a free ride on this human journey may make sense in a black and white world but doesn’t fit with a God who is constantly trying to redeem the world through us => to do this we have to be compassionate, merciful and forgiving.

I want to leave you with two remarkable quotes from rather unexpected quarters BUT they challenge our insight and wisdom -> they remind us that God is God and it is unwise to reduce the divine to our human prejudices.

The first is from the late actor Gregory Peck.

Faith gives you an inner strength and a sense of balance and perspective in life. Gregory Peck

The second wise comment is from novelist, journalist and "character" Ernest Hemingway. (perhaps an unexpected source for a sermon!!)

"There is nothing noble in being superior to your fellow man; true nobility is being superior to your former self." Ernest Hemingway