

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 23 – Year B Revised Common Lectionary
October 11, 2009
St. James Episcopal Church, Pullman WA
The Rev. Mary Beth Rivetti, Rector

Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Psalm 22:1-15; Mark 10:17-31

Netflix has saved my life. Over the past year and a half while George was getting progressively sicker, Netflix was my lifeline to movies new and old, whole television series I'd missed, and wonderful concert films of Ella Fitzgerald, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Glenn Gould. It also lets me reserve a copy for future rental of movies that have just come out. With our limited market here in Pullman, it is hardly likely that we are going to see *A Serious Man*, which opened the beginning of this month, in our local theaters. This is the latest film by the Coen Brothers, who brought us *Raising Arizona*, *Brother Where Art Thou*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *the Big Lebowski*. And it's their take on the Book of Job, one of the most amazing books in the whole Bible. I've got the DVD on my queue, lined up for to arrive, probably right around the time the Oscars are being awarded.

We think we know the book of Job. But like all great literature, it needs to be read over and over again. We think we know Job, and we talk about the patience of Job. But we sure don't see much in the way of patience in today's passage, do we? Just to recap, the story takes place in some mythic past, in the land of Uz – long, long ago in a galaxy far, far away. There lived the most righteous man on earth. Job is good, he is pious. He has raised his family to be good and pious. He has been blessed with wealth and status and beautiful sons and daughters. God is rightly proud of his servant Job – so proud, that he enters into a bet with the Adversary to strip Job of all that is his, just to show that he will not curse God, but rather show his piety even to the point of death.

Now right there we have a very strange story. One we perhaps don't imagine might be in Holy Scripture. God acting like a prideful monarch, willing to sacrifice innocent people to prove a point about his servant Job. Any way you look at this story, God doesn't really come off good. This is more like the God that Moses has to placate in the wilderness, telling him that if he wipes out the Israelites for their transgressions, it will make him look bad. A very human, very petty God indeed.

And once things go wrong for Job, his friends come to console him. They sit in silence, compassionately sharing in his sorrow at the sudden inexplicable loss of his children, his property, his livestock. Then they start trying to figure out what is going on. In their system of understanding, goodness is rewarded by well-being; wickedness by disaster. Since disaster has struck Job, he must have done something wrong. Something. He just has to figure it out. And repent. There must be some reason for the ills that beset us. Too much aluminum in our pots leads to Parkinson's. Our diet leads to our cancer. Our starving children are the fault of our faithlessness. We just have to repent.

Job's wife tells him to give it up. Stop trying to figure out what went wrong. Just give up his clinging to the myth of the righteousness of God. Curse God, she says famously, and die. Get it over with! Perhaps the most practical advice in the whole book.

But Job, who isn't patient at all, remains steadfastly defiant. He knows that he has not done anything wrong. He knows that he has lived an exemplary life. He knows that he has done everything by the book. So he deserves God – right here. Right now. Right before my face. The more his friends tell him to repent of his mysterious evil deeds, the more reckless he becomes in insisting on calling on God to explain what is happening. The more he demands, as his right, a face to face confrontation with the lord

of life. Well, we know what's coming, right? Stay tuned.

But in our readings today we hear that claim on God's presence in a number of ways. The psalmist wants to know why God is suddenly absent when he has a whole catalogue of instances when God has been actively involved in the life of his nation, and in his own existence. You drew me out of my mother's womb. You placed me on my mother's breast. God is the midwife to my life. How much closer could we get? And yet now when I am weak with fear, God is absent. We only read part of the psalm today; the conclusion of the psalm goes on to rest in assurance of God's presence. But for today, just for today, we get to sit with the cries of those who feel the absence of God. Who have looked for God far and wide, up and down, north and south, and found ... nothing. Surely in our lives we know that feeling. Surely when we pick up the papers, we imagine those who know that feeling. When we gather today our collected offerings for the United Thank Offering and the Episcopal Relief and Development, we gather our solidarity and hope for those who have long cried out for the justice of God, demanded that evil be put right, and who have heard silence. Nothing.

So I want you to imagine that man who comes up to Jesus in the Gospel account. We think of him as a rich young ruler – in Matthew's Gospel he is a rich young man; in Luke's Gospel he is a ruler; but Mark's Gospel just tells us he's someone. Could be one of us. And, by the way, he has a lot of possessions. He wants to know what to do to inherit eternal life. To be saved. And like Job, he's been living this exemplary life. Jesus lists off the commandments, and he ticks them off too – I've been in line with this my whole life. Always. Always. What else? What else?

We know the story. But I want to know why the man came up to Jesus in the first place. He had his reward for his good life, didn't he? Still in the time of Jesus the idea is that goodness is rewarded with blessing; disaster is the reward for wickedness. He has the blessing that assures him that God has been paying attention to his righteousness. Why doesn't he think that's enough? He's itching for more, even though he has all he needs and then some.

That's us, see. We have the blessing of our life. Some of it is the reward for our prudence and good stewardship of the talents and gifts we have been given, to be sure. Some of it is the accident of our being born in the United States of America, beneficiaries of the blessings of geography and geology, and climate that have enriched generations of inhabitants of this part of the world beyond all measure. But we're itchy for more aren't we? That's part of why we're here, isn't it? And we want to know what it takes to inherit eternal life. What do we do to get saved?

What does it mean to inherit eternal life? What does it mean to be saved? What's our goal, anyway? Are we not aiming for that intimacy with God, that moment of assurance and comfort when we were first drawn from our mother's womb and placed at her breast? That unrecoverable sense of safety, promise, comfort? And is that not what Jesus holds out to us as eternal life? Not some destination paradise – though it might feel like that – but rather that intimacy of being womb-close to God. Isn't that what we need? And isn't that what Jesus holds out in his inbreaking kingdom when he storms through Mark's Gospel rushing around restoring people to wholeness, radically lifting up those who are downtrodden, and dragging the last in line up to first place and the first to last?

So what gets in the way of our intimacy with God? What are the things that pull us from that wholeness? Those commandments that Jesus lists – those are the communal ones, not the pious temple regulations, but the ones that begin with radical love of neighbor. How are we doing there? How are we doing with the needs of those who are starving? Are we weighed down with possessions while others are naked? Are we comfortable and well-fed while others are oppressed?

In the graphic novel Mark'd, this scene is drawn beautifully, as the man comes up to Jesus with all his possessions piled on his back. He is staggering under the load and can barely put one foot in front of the other. And Jesus tries to help him let go of those things that are distorting him, those things that are running his life and weighing him down, and keeping him from the full enjoyment of the life that God has granted him. Keeping him from the abundant life that Jesus came to offer to us all.

In this season of the fall pledge campaign, we ask everyone to turn inside for awhile to think about what they need for that full enjoyment of the abundant life. What is standing between our intimate love of God? From that womb-close care and nurture of eternal life?

And as we take a look at that, we are invited to recommit our treasure in proportion to our values. The Biblical proportion was ten percent – and if that seems onerous, remember that Pharaoh took twice that amount, and the credit card companies take even more. This is not the time for us to suggest that you provide ten percent of your wealth to St. James. But rather to look at where your money is going. And how much of your money you freely and truly have control over, and you freely and truly can give to the project of God's kingdom. I suspect that not all your gifts to the kingdom come straight to St. James, though we can try to make a case for that. It is the mission of the Church to restore all creation with God through Christ after all.

Perhaps you give directly to those in need. The Millennium Development Goals are a very good guide for that giving. But in this season we are asking more more than your pledge to a public radio station, or a gift to your alma mater or a check to the food bank. We are asking you to do nothing short of turning your life upside down. Of doing something as radical and painful as selling all you have and giving it to God. Carving out space in your budget for that freewill gift to God's kingdom is a good way to start. Carving out a God-shaped hole in your wallet that bends you into a human shaped by that tithe, that tenth portion.

Of course, it's impossible. Who can be saved, the disciples cry. They keep hearing these impossible exaggerations from their teacher. Cut off their hands? Don't get divorced? Give up everything? We HAVE done that, they say. What are we supposed to do now? And of course the answer is that all along we don't have to do it at all. Eternal life comes here in the person of Jesus Christ. It's here at this table in the bread and the wine. There's no earning it. There's only stripping away all the stuff that gets in our way so we can't see it right here. So we can't take it and feed on it in our hearts with thanksgiving.