

Year B
Twenty-first Sunday After Pentecost
Job 23:1-9, 16-17
Psalm 22:1-15 (Call to Worship)
Mark 10:17-31

Job 23:1-9, 16-17

Job Replies: My Complaint Is Bitter

23 Then Job answered:

- ² 'Today also my complaint is bitter;
God's hand is heavy despite my groaning.
³ O that I knew where I might find him,
that I might come even to God's dwelling!
⁴ I would lay my case before him,
and fill my mouth with arguments.
⁵ I would learn what he would answer me,
and understand what he would say to me.
⁶ Would he contend with me in the greatness of God's power?
No; but he would give heed to me.
⁷ There an upright person could reason with him,
and I should be acquitted for ever by my judge.

⁸ 'If I go forward, he is not there;
or backward, I cannot perceive him;
⁹ on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him;
I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.
¹⁶ God has made my heart faint;
the Almighty has terrified me;
¹⁷ If only I could vanish in darkness,
and thick darkness would cover my face!

Psalm 22:1-15

Plea for Deliverance from Suffering and Hostility

To the leader: according to The Deer of the Dawn. A Psalm of David.

- ¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

³ Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.

⁴ In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.
⁵ To you they cried, and were saved;
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

⁶ But I am a worm, and not human;
scorned by others, and despised by the people.
⁷ All who see me mock at me;
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;
⁸ ‘Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver—
let him rescue the one in whom he delights!’

⁹ Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother’s breast.
¹⁰ On you I was cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.
¹¹ Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.

¹² Many bulls encircle me,
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;
¹³ they open wide their mouths at me,
like a ravening and roaring lion.

¹⁴ I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast;
¹⁵ my mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.

Mark 10:17-31

The Rich Man

¹⁷ As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’¹⁸ Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹You know the commandments: “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother.”’ ²⁰He said to him, ‘Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.’ ²¹Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ ²²When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

23 Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’²⁴ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, ‘Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’²⁶ They were greatly astounded and said to one another, ‘Then who can be saved?’²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.’

28 Peter began to say to him, ‘Look, we have left everything and followed you.’²⁹ Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news,³⁰ who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.’³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.’

When God Can't Be Found

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable and lovely in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

There is a community about 75 miles outside of downtown Charleston, SC. It used to only be accessible by boat or driving a long way around the tidal rivers and salt marshes that surrounded it. Peppered by the sites of former plantation, these historic black communities were populated by descendants of freed slaves who borrowed, saved, and pooled their money to buy land after the Civil War and a small grouping of French Huguenots who similarly sought freedom and autonomy. The land was relatively undesirable what with the heat, humidity, and mosquitos, and the residents were largely left to themselves even after the advent of air conditioning.

So much so that services were scarce to be found. After Hurricane Hugo, residents went 2-3 months without electricity. Then the 526 freeway was built and made their community much more accessible. They were an afterthought, with Amoco, BP, and manufacturing plants built nearby with no thought about the health impacts to the residents. They were a pass-through for freight trucks making their way from the plants nearby to the ports. The residents complained about the danger of the trucks to their neighborhoods and children to no avail. The largest former plantation plot was sold to developers for high-end planned communities. All of a sudden long-awaited amenities like grocery stores and recreation areas were available, but not to them and their families outside the gated communities. Then their homes were considered a “blight” to the facades of the new developments despite being one of the most historic black landscapes in our country. They went to council meetings warning of the rising property taxes, the disrespect of the developers’ trucks to their yards. Little meaningful response resulted.

These communities, Wando and Huger, are where I did my research for my master’s thesis at the University of Michigan in the summer of 2004. One woman we’ll call Victoria told me:

You know, there’s no respect. None at all. Just because, and you know, they accommodating the subdivision right behind me. That’s what accommodation is. When I

look, they plant trees, and that's another thing, I have to call, too—I can't even see to get out of my own driveway, they plant the trees, the trees are so high. So...to kinda block my house... [t]hey paint the fence the color I paint my house. I meant to paint my house orange and polka dot to see if they were going to change their fence! (Smiles.) I was going to do it. I thought about it, but I said no. At first, they make me mad, and I was going to do that. I was going to paint it bright it bright gold- orange, something off the wall.¹

What do we have to get noticed, she was asking, and in a way that allows one to be a valued part of the community, and not “othered?” Wando, Huger, and Cainhoy residents often said that they used to call their community one that must be “behind God’s back,”² because they were so often ignored and seemingly afflicted, forgotten by God.

Years later I was working with a small non-profit in the rural community of Waimanalo on O‘ahu to help them procure a community development grant. The Executive Director to my surprise, told me that they thought of themselves a community “behind God’s back. Separated by 4,750 miles, these two communities shared this similar experience of feeling not only ignored by the towns around them, but by God Godself. And who knows this feeling better than Job, whose story of utter devotion to God and God taking everything away anyway is infamous. He says:

‘Today also my complaint is bitter;
God’s hand is heavy despite my groaning.
O that I knew where I might find God,
that I might come even to God’s dwelling!
I would lay my case before God,
and fill my mouth with arguments.³

Now, there is a fascinating interpretation of the book of Job that understands the entire book to be a case in the court of the gods, but we’ll leave that for another time—but just notice here that Job believes that if he could plead his case to God, all would be restored to him. But God is nowhere to be found.

In fact in the last part of our reading Job takes the imagery from Psalm 139, known as the Psalm to the “Inescapable God”—you know the one:

Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

¹ Terry Yasuko Ogawa, “Wando-Huger: A Study of the Impacts of Development on the Cultural Role of Land in Black Communities of the South Carolina Lowcountry,” 2008, 4-16-4-17, accessed December 12, 2010.

² Herb Frazier, *Behind God’s Back: Gullah Memories Cainhoy, Wando, Huger, Daniel Island, St. Thomas Island, South Carolina* (Charleston, S.C: Evening Post Books, 2011).

³ Job 23: 2-4

If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night',
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.⁴

That's the one. But Job turns "the inability to escape the divine presence" into "the inaccessibility of God."⁵

If I go forward, God is not there;
or backward, I cannot perceive God;
on the left God hides, and I cannot behold God;
I turn to the right, but I cannot see God.
God has made my heart faint;
the Almighty has terrified me;
If only I could vanish in darkness,
and thick darkness would cover my face!⁶

There are times when our suffering seems too much. When vanishing in the darkness would feel welcome, as Job felt in his despair. In those times, it can feel that God has, in words of Psalm 22, "forsaken [us]" and is far off, too deaf to hear our cries. There are fears we carry and suffering for which there is no answer. Jesus' cries on the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me,"⁷ echo the words of the Psalmist. In this we can know that we are never alone in our suffering, for God through Jesus knows the deepest human suffering and pain.

Now I had a quote here from Tricia Gates Brown about "[N]o matter what happens, no matter how long the trek through the valley of the shadow of death, I will have the one thing I cannot live without. That is, union with the Great Spirit. . . . Even the right path sometimes leads through the valley of the shadow of death."⁸ But you know what, that's a cop out for these scriptures today. These scriptures are for the times when we flat out lose God completely and feel so utterly alone.

People will fail us; we will fail ourselves. Jesus says, "No one is good but God alone."⁹ It is part of the human condition, much as clinging to our possessions is a human proclivity, like that rich

⁴ Psalm 139:7-12

⁵ Lisa Davison, "Job," in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, ed. Walter J. Harrelson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 728.

⁶ Job 2:8-9, 16-17

⁷ Mark 15:34

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Mark 10:18

man in the Gospels today who has kept all of the commandments since he was young. And he tells Jesus this, and:

Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’¹⁰

The disciples ask, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”¹¹ All things are possible through God, though the miracles may not be what we want or expect. It really might look like survival in the face of great injustice. Finding that we have the tenacity to survive the worst, and even that love conquers death, that we are not left bitter in a tomb of our own making, or worse, one that we can’t explain at all. Jesus finishes the teaching by saying:

“Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”¹²

How in the world? Well, Church, yesterday we heard Rev. Dian Griffin Jackson preach at the Eastern North Carolina Association of the Southern Conference of the UCC Fall Association Gathering. Dian preached on Nehemiah and said that it’s time to celebrate, and this is a woman who lost her own son to gun violence in Raleigh. She praised God so high I thought the rafters were going to shatter. And she said, “I don’t look like all that I’ve been through.” Lord, I knew what she meant, and I thanked God for the ways that God manages to carry us through.

At that same gathering I met a woman named Rosena Henderson from St. Stephen Congregational Church in Beaufort, NC, one of two surviving African-American churches in the town. Y’all, we have our own areas that are “behind God’s back” right here in North Carolina. She was the only one there from her church, because her house is mostly ok, and other church members’ are not. She said many of her church members can’t go home because of storm damage, and there’s a lack of affordable housing there already. Y’all, as of October 3, 600 people were still living in storm shelters in the southeastern part of the state, and that was before Tropical Storm Michael came through.¹³ Now the newspaper listed some ways to help, including

¹⁰ Mark 10:21-23

¹¹ Mark 10:26-27

¹² Mark 10:29-31

¹³ Josh Shaffer, “Evacuated and Evicted, Many of Hurricane Florence’s Victims Have Nowhere To Go,” *The News and Observer* (Raleigh, NC, October 7, 2018), accessed October 14, 2018, <https://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/article219637905.html>.

hoping folks with vacation properties will consider a 6-month rental to storm-affected families or ways to help with repairs. But I got to talking with Rev. Ervin Milton and Ms. Rosena, and later Conference Minister Rev. Dr. Davis, about what it would look like for churches across the Conference to adopt families from these churches for Christmas. What would it look like, church, to help our sisters and brothers in Christ and be about the business of God's work restoring hope to the afflicted?

I can tell you something that's important to how we engage these types of mission work, as Pema Chödrön writes:

Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It's a relationship between equals. Only when we know our own darkness well can we be present with the darkness of others. Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity.¹⁴

The Disciples gave up everything to follow Jesus, so they would know what it was to help those who had nothing. When we recognize our own needs for connection, for salvation, and what happens when we give up all we have to follow the Holy One who calls us, even out of our own feelings of destitution, fear, and loss, we are able to connect to the ministries to which we are called. We are able to celebrate the God of Love in the face of death. We discover in that dancing in the light that we are truly never alone, though hard the road may be. God sees us as truly as Jesus saw that young man and his despairing disciples. As surely as God heard Job's case and restored all to him. Even in our hardest moments, friends, we are never behind God's back, and the darkness is not dark to God.¹⁵ Be fierce in the face of hardship. You who know darkness: Let the light in, and in turn bear it to others, with God's help, and in God's time, so that all may be restored by God working through us.

Amen.

¹⁴ Pema Chodron, *The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times* (Shambhala, 2002), 154.

¹⁵ Psalm 139