

## ***Sermon***

### ***I Must be in the Front Row!***

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Our passage from Job comes after Job has expressed his anguish to God for the extreme losses he has suffered in his life. It comes after his friends spend significant time counseling Job and trying to explain his circumstance despite the power and majesty of YHWH, the God of the Old Testament – the God of rath, the God of fire, the God of power. After 37 chapters, God extends an answer to Job. Our passage leads off – “Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind..” So it appears, God has something to say. I imagine God was waiting and listening and could stand no more of it. The frustration from his servant Job and the misguided lecture from Job’s friends. Elusive no more, the Lord speaks to Job at last. Job has poured his heart out, shaking his fist toward heaven, defending his integrity, challenging the pious orthodoxy expressed by his comforters, all the while making his case for the world according to Job.

Whereas Job is awaiting answers – he unfortunately receives only questions. Questions Job has no answers for that come like floodwaters. Some may say that God’s words are meant to overwhelm Job into a retraction of his case. But some say God is offering job a chance to be renewed, enlarging his vision on what it means to be human.

Everything happens for a reason...have you ever said it? I have. Usually in circumstances where something unexpected and perhaps tragic has occurred. Have you ever had it said to you? Maybe after the death of

a loved one? Or after a diagnosis of a serious illness? An accident with tragic outcomes? ...Everything happens for a reason. But what's the reason? I mean what does that statement really mean? Are we to believe that our loved one who died was supposed to be dead? And God wishes us to now be without them so that our lives can go in a new direction, a different path, without them?

If we look at God's response to Job – we might find an answer in those questions after all.

<sup>4</sup> “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

<sup>5</sup> Who determined its measurements—surely you know!

Or who stretched the line upon it?

<sup>6</sup> On what were its bases sunk,

or who laid its cornerstone

<sup>7</sup> when the morning stars sang together

and all the heavenly beings<sup>[a]</sup> shouted for joy?”

The answer to these questions reveals a great distance between God and humanity, for it is clear that God alone has the knowledge and the power with regard to all of these things. Job does not have this cosmological knowledge, nor the power to sustain or sway the world in which he lives. Job may indeed be God's special servant, as is made clear in the end of our reading, but that special status does not mean that the distance between Creator and creature has been overcome.

Everything happens for a reason – this statement actually presumes that we have some God-like cosmic knowledge of the creation. That we

know what God is up to in those moments...but we don't, not really. And I can tell you first hand – I know it's well meaning, but “everything happens for a reason” rarely brings comfort to the afflicted. But in those moments people have other questions like Job – they want to know why...why did I get sick? Why was my son the one in that teen-driver car wreck? Why did I get stuck with a job in the third company in a row that has been taken over by a big corporation? Why am I still living when all my friends and my whole generation of the family is dead?

We humans have no answer to these questions and even when those who ask, know there is no answer. What possible answer could we give that would make sense? These why statements are more important than a question – they are a cry of pain, an attempt by the grieved to make some sense of what is going on. And Job is with you – he spends much of his time asking why and his friends make a feeble attempt at answering though they are misguided. Finally in that whirlwind when God shows up, well God takes a great risk in the response – basically telling Job – look I've got a universe to take care of here – and you human are only one small part of it. So man up. If we look at nature, we can see the indifference nature has on the trials of we mere mortals – fires burn throughout our forests and on the edge, animals and plants and flowers live...they don't worry about the humans that perished, the homes that were destroyed – they continue to do what a bird does, what a squirrel does. And I'm certain the squirrel that frequents our hallways and ceilings doesn't sit and think, those poor humans, I shouldn't damage their building this way. Well, in this statement, God seems to be saying the same thing – I've got more important things to

do...but...God is talking to Job. Job receives favor in that while the answers aren't what he expects, God provides answers still.

Our Gospel from Mark we find the disciples getting it wrong once again. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, are looking for long-term security...not for the "People" or believers – but for themselves. Now given that we know the end of this story, they don't realize what they are asking for – kind of like the stowaways on the Titanic maybe- but this question reveals just how self-absorbed they are. In Mark's gospel, this request follows Jesus' third prediction of his passion in Chapter 10:32-34. It is surprising then that these two disciples would ask for seats beside Jesus in his coming glory. Had they not been listening? When we read this scripture, it is almost comical or at the very least embarrassing for these two to ask for this. But at closer look, we are all in some ways sons of Zebedee. Certainly we know better than to make outlandish, insensitive requests, as this narcissistic duo does, but we want the best seats in the house. We may not be upfront about our self-centered yearnings, but many of us spend our lives scheming for those kinds of privileged positions. We may try for powerful positions within our church or other organizations we belong to or at our jobs so we can have the influence upon the things that matter most....to us. So are we really that different from these greedy sons of Zebedee? We might not make outlandish requests, but in our hearts, if we are honest, we are looking to sit in the front row. We can explain it away by looking at the fruits of our good deeds or our hard work, but in any event, this is human nature – this is how we are. We want the best.

For Job – he wanted God to explain why...why Job had lost so much when others had not experienced that. ...Everything happens for a reason...maybe, but it is impossible for us to know that. God made that very clear. The pain we feel in those moments of loss or grief or confusion come from our tendency to be like the sons of Zebedee...I was complaining the other day about having to drive in the rain to my husband and he said, you can't control the weather – and I said, but why everytime I have to go somewhere like this does it rain. He said, you're such a drama queen! And I corrected him and said, actually I'm a whiner! But I do want the easy road – I get frustrated when obstacles present themselves and I do cry why at those moments...But it is only in facing our own tendencies to be a son or daughter of Zebedee that we can come to terms with our humanity and live the new life of discipleship. Henri Nouwen wrote, "Only those who face their wounded condition can be available for healing and so enter a new way of living." When we are honest with ourselves about our condition, we can begin a journey toward wholeness. Jesus is a model of wholeness, and thus he could come "not to be served but to serve". When we have dealt with our issues and overcome the insecurities that drive us to greed and coveting, we, like Jesus, can be in a position to serve at least some of the time and not be served all the time.

Transformation happens through servanthood. What does that mean – it means we have to get out of our own heads, our own agendas and look not just upon what is important to us individually but how what we do and don't do effects the whole creation. God needs and expects this from us. So do things happen for a reason? Perhaps, but it is not us to understand or know that reason – it is up to us to stand with one another through the

pain and sadness and know that is part of our human condition. When we serve each other, honor each other's pain and unhappiness rather than immediately trying to pull the grieving away from their pain, we truly understand what it means to be a disciple of Christ.

Amen