

6-20-2021 4th Pentecost

Blessed Sunday, friends. We are gathering on the Summer Solstice day--and Happy Father's Day!--with some remarkable texts, as usual.

Let us begin the name of God, Abba Imma, Son and Holy Spirit.

I'd like to share with you a bit of a reflection prior to hearing this first text from Job.

The entire creation is a gift of grace. The miracle is that anything exists. We're always talking about what exists, or, what doesn't exist. The miracle is that anything exists. Within this grace, God is revealed to Job. God doesn't crush Job with divine power, but speaks to him of God's creative freedom, and, God's respect for human freedom.

Job, like all of us, wants to confront God.

'Who's in charge here? What do you think you're doing?

Why is this life such a mess? If you're responsible, you should fix it!'

In the person of Job, we are presented with all of the innocent of this world, who suffer unjustly and ask, 'Why?'

A Liberation theologian, [Gustavo] Gutierrez has been incredibly helpful in opening up the Book of Job for me and many others. Most of us were raised with kind of a 'This is an existential question, you know: *'Why am I suffering? There seems to be no reason for it.'* And those questions go through us. Gutierrez argues (and I think very convincingly) that it is the innocent of this world whom Job is representing.

And that's why I am by this painting this morning, done by an artist friend named Shakur. Bill Carmel introduced and brought Shakur to us, probably a decade ago. His painting is from Kabul in Afghanistan. A man who was the actual person about whom this painting was done [was] in intense suffering. And we see that this painting is almost impossible to look at. This is the price of war--of every war. This is the outcome. I'm happy to share with you that, fairly recently, Shakur's family finally was able to join him here in the states. And Martha [Mantei], who actually saw his studio in Pleasanton recently, invites us to go there and see other works of his.

But this is also the spirit, yes, of every refugee and immigrant, and those who are fleeing for their lives. This is the spirit of those children jailed in our border--jailed--separated from their parents, and their cry. We all know their crimes, don't we? These children, three and four, ten years old--their crime was being born; their crime was being born poor; their crime was being born poor on the wrong side of the wall. And Jesus too, you recall, shares their experience, their suffering, and his own execution.

This, these, are the people whose stories Job is representing. And God speaks to Job in an unpredictable way. God does not respond to the distress of Job's questions, or the hardships that we carry.

God, it says at the beginning of this passage, speaks from the heart of the tempest--from heart of fire and storm, of catastrophe and earthquake, the upheaval of nature. This is an ancient image of God, speaking from deep within the chaos, erupting. But fear is unnecessary, because God is not here to intimidate. God does not inflict on Job some punishment. In fact, God confirms Job's innocence.

God, instead, attends to Job's needs with this creative response. And Job, as he had declared earlier, can only respond with praise, for our God is not identified with raw power, or destructive power, but with freedom, with boundless love, and even tenderness, and mercy.

Here is the text from **Job 38**--after Job's complaints of 37 chapters in length.

From the heart of the tempest, God spoke to Job.

God said, 'Who is this obscuring my intentions with his ignorant words? Brace yourself like a fighter; I am going to ask the questions, and you, Job, are to inform me!

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?

Tell me, since you are so well informed!

Who decided the dimensions of creation, do you know?

Or who stretched the measuring line across it?

What supports the pillars of the earth at their bases?

Who laid the cornerstone to the joyful concert of the morning stars?

And, who heard the unanimous acclaim of the sons and daughters of God?

Who, I ask you, Job, who pent up the sea behind closed doors when it left tumultuously from the womb, when I wrapped the sea in a robe of mist and made dark clouds its swaddling bands;

when I cut out the place I had decreed for it, and I imposed the gates with a bolt on the sea.

'Come so far', I commanded, 'and no further--for here, great sea, your proud waves must break!'

The Word of God.

The Corinthians lesson for today, **2 Corinthians, chapter 6**, begins in this fashion.

As fellow-workers with Christ, we urge you not to let your acceptance of God's grace come to nothing. We avoid putting obstacles in anyone's way, so that no blame may be attached to our work of service. In everything we prove ourselves authentic friends of God; and with resolute perseverance in times of hardship, and difficulties, and distress. We trust in the work of Christ, even in those times of sleeplessness or hunger. In knowledge, in patience, in kindness, we live in the Holy Spirit, in a love, free of affectation. We live by the word of truth, given to us in the power of God, using the weapons of righteousness for our defense. And in times of honor or disgrace, times of blame or praise, those times when we are taken for imposters--and yet we are genuine; times when we are unknown, we know we are recognized; in times of dying, yet we

realize we are alive. And in pain, we too yet know the fullness of God's joy. Therefore, though poor, yet we make many people rich; and though having nothing, we realize we own everything.

Blessed be God's name.

[Gary Sponholtz plays and sings the Alleluia]

The Gospel for today is from **Mark, chapter 4.**

With the coming of evening, Jesus said to them, 'Let us cross over to the other side of the lake.' And leaving the crowd behind they took him, just as he was, in the boat; and there were other boats with them. Then it began to blow a great gale and storm, and the waves were breaking into the boat so that it was almost swamped. But Jesus was in the stern, his head on a cushion, asleep. The disciples woke him and said to him, 'Master, do you not care? We are lost!' And he woke up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, 'Quiet! Be calm!' And the wind dropped, and there followed a great calm. Then he said to the disciples, 'Why are you so frightened? Have you still no faith?' The disciples were overcome with awe and they said to one another, 'Who can this be? Even the wind and the sea obey him.'

The Word of God. Praise to you, O Christ.

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In the name of the merciful and tender one. Amen.

Our God acts in history. This is a really big deal. Our Judeo-Christian, common, shared ethic, and deep belief is that God acts in history, whether it's through nations, through the people of Israel, through the church, or through individuals. God and God's Spirit is always at work in our lives now.

Job questions God's intentions, and if there is a plan. Job doubts God even cares about justice--this world is so topsy-turvy; is there anyone governing this world?

God clarifies the meaning of divine wisdom in human history. In the text that we have for today, the origin of God's intention is endless generosity of life. That's what the [hebrew] word *Tov* means in the creation story. It is life generating; it is good; it's a blessing. It is meant to continue unfolding and unending. Creative love has birthed this universe.

So after Job has spoken his piece for thirty-seven chapters, God responds by saying, '*Gird your loins.*' That's ancient talk for 'Brace yourself--like a fighter.' God is inviting Job into the boxing ring. From the outset, Yahweh attacks Job's presuppositions, and this is the heart of God's message. Hear this portion of the Job text again.

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, since you're so well informed, who decided its dimensions? What supports the pillars at the base? Who laid the cornerstone? Who

painted the sea behind closed doors, when it left tumultuously from the womb, when I wrapped the sea in a robe of mist and dark clouds as swaddling bands, and I decreed 'Come so far, sea, and no further; here your proud waves break'?

You think that was addressed to the sea--or to us? God is going directly to the source of all existing things, to the place where time-space began, even before evolution--the earth's foundation, its pillars at their base. Right there is where God engages Job and friends in this conversation. What brought the world into order is not usefulness for human beings. That's what we want, and--we believe--justifies our actions: It's good for me; it's useful; it's productive; it's pragmatic.

And what that justifies, in the long run, is a life of retribution, because when things don't work out clearly, it's somebody else's fault--*the government, the system, these people--the poor, the vulnerable, the children. It's not me. I want my just retribution, and I want punishment for sinners.* We believe or impose that this is the reason for God's creation, and that history must have a predictable path and outcome. So we're enraged when it doesn't work out.

God attacks Job precisely at this point.

Where were you? What do you know about the foundation of the cosmos?

God, who has been able to restrain the pride of the sea, now does the same with the pretensions of Job and his friends, who want to establish the limits and the channels by which God must act in history.

No, storms of life rage. Challenging times emerge. But as we heard in the gospel today, the calm one is asleep in the midst of the storm. And having been awakened, he simply speaks to wind and wave and says, "Cool it; calm down." The disciples are dismayed--and [but]??Jesus is acting in the spirit of the origin of the whole creation story.

Maybe that's the name we should begin to apply to Jesus: 'The Calm One.'

I'm a follower of The Calm One, who even in the midst of crisis knows where to rest.

What Job needs is a new understanding. He needs to discern what is the truth of the universe. For Job, it is a shock to learn that the doctrine of retribution is not the key to the universe.

Because this doctrine of retribution, you see, always keeps me in the center of the universe.

I get to decide, according to my self-interest, what is good for you, for others, for God. Got any problems with that? Seems pretty efficient to me.

But God is encouraging our believing. And, as we say, for no reason at all.

It's a theme that is set up the very beginning of the book of Job, that God is the one who moves freely and graciously--always in the spirit of divine love--to create this life.

But God will not impose false barriers or obstacles upon us. We may come crashing into them, but God respects our freedom as well. That is the unending generosity of God: to give us the freedom to act, to choose, to become wise, and to practice compassion. This is something at the very heart of the work of creation. This grace, this compassion, is not "added on" later. The grace which gave birth to all that is, is the very hinge and pivot upon which the world turns. This grace is the motivation not only for the source of creation, but it is what leads us into communion with all of life, and with the two freedoms--God's freedom, and our freedom too.

This grace, therefore, must be the grounding to which we always return. It is the grounding of earth and stars, and it is, finally, in Christ that calm grounding which births everything--and you.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Today in our prayers, we pray--
for Karen and Doug, in need of wise counsel, and a compassionate future.
We pray for Drew, and Dennis, and Seth,
for Ed and Libby Klitch,
for Dana, and Pam,
for Marshall,
for Sue Shuffield in her time of grieving,
for John Dahlin, Bob Worthington, Bob Mantei,
Stanley Ngessa, Margit, Kyle,
for Moriah, and Maili,
we pray for Lenny, and Grant,
for Heather, Rodger, Mary, Ralph, and Joanne Henry.

God in your mercy, hear our prayer.

And we pray for all who live in faith, who struggle for peace, for wisdom, and grace.
We also include Dale, Gary's mother, and our congregation,
that we discern the path of grace in which we have been created.

God in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Fulfill the dreams of our hearts, the longings of truth, that lead us ever closer to communion with you, O God, and communion with all life.

We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord's face shine upon you and be gracious to you; The Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace. Amen.

