**St. Aidan’s Episcopal Church**

**Proper 24B**

**Job 38:1-7, 34-41**

**Psalm 104: 1-9, 25,37b**

**Hebrews 5: 1-10**

**Mark 10: 35-45**

**The Conversation**

We haven’t been paying enough attention to Job for the past several weeks. Maybe because we just can’t take listening to someone else’s litany of suffering any longer. We are still living through the second year of global suffering. Enough already, Job. And we’ve sort of had it with Job’s friends, as well. They made their appearance post haste, in earlier chapters: there was Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamithite, all basically making sure Job gets that he has brought all his troubles upon himself due to his continual sin and wickedness.

They are supposed to be Job’s friends come to comfort him, and all he hears from them is the central theme: You get what you deserve -- your suffering is a result of your sin. Lovely. Who wouldn’t want friends like these. Or who would. Maybe because we recognize them only too well. They render up their knee-jerk solutions to all Job’s troubles, assuming and asserting themselves as authorized mouthpieces for God. They’ve more than made themselves visible throughout the pandemic and all the suffering it has caused each one of us directly or indirectly in one way or another.

If we listen to the global conversation about COVID-19, vaccinations disputes, distribution slowdowns, systems and infrastructure breakdowns, and more and more people sinking into poverty and homelessness, it doesn’t take long for our own Elphaz’s, Bildad’s and Zophar’s to show up pointing fingers. And they have no need for specialized training or expertise with which to pontificate upon who’s at the foundation of fault, or whose sins have caused any of it. For example, they do not exhibit humble suggestions or solutions regarding how one might contribute toward ending the pandemic. Rather they prefer to cling to long-outdated interpretations of how to place blame, why to place blame, and to misconstrue the meaning of freedom and equality by simply advocating freedom and equality for the chosen few. The innocents. The ones God favors. Whoever they may be in the moment.

It’s a bunch of bunk and we’re all fed up with hearing it all, just as the faithful Job was probably pretty fed up with the accusatory ranting of his friends and wondering if he’d hitched his horse to the wrong wagon.

Maybe that’s why we’ve avoided getting into too much conversation with Job and his litany of complaints about one thing after another. Except for today. Today, thank God, God finally speaks to Job, coming to Job out of the whirlwind. God is the one talking, and Job is well and truly silenced, along with his friends. When God speaks, we listen, and we wait with baited breath to find out whether God thinks Job’s friend’s theories about crime and punishment are correct, or whether God thinks they are full of bunk, too, and has an explanation for Job’s troubles that Job can understand and accept.

Well, we shouldn’t be too surprised if we don’t hear either of these. But we should be relieved to know God is there and that God is aware of our suffering. In fact, we should, as was Job, be relieved and comforted to know that God is very present in our times of trouble, even though sometimes we think God is absent in our suffering.

We would love God to give us the answers to our questions about suffering. Why do the innocent suffer, the faithful suffer? Why did my loved one have to die? Why did this suffering have to come upon me? Why? But we receive no answers in the way we like to receive them with our earthly expectations. They are questions which have to do with our earthly experience of living as humankind. Rather, the context of God’s direction, springs out of God’s very foundation of Creation and that still-evolving Creation within the world today.

Yet, God also reminds Job and reminds us, that while life happens, and things happen for good or evil, as part of living with the free will that God bestowed upon humankind since the time of Adam and Eve, whether that be a pandemic, natural disaster, humankind’s errors in judgment, quick fix solutions without consideration of long-term consequences, our forgetfulness, our neglect – all and any of our sinfulness that is part of our human reality, that, at the end of the day, it is not humankind that created the world and thus it is not humankind’s place to try to control creation. It is not humankind that created heaven or earth, that created the flora and the fauna and their place in the grand scheme and intricate balance of ecology. On might interpret God’s reaction as almost God being in Job’s face. An angry God. A God, who like the humankind God created, has had it up to here with all our whining and complaining. Who do we think we are, anyway. None of us were there when the universes came into being with their stars, suns and moons. None of us were there to see God’s first lightening strike of earth-shaking sound of thunder. We might note here, that it seems humankind is not at the center of God’s universe, much as we like to think we are. If only humankind could get that small item through it’s communal head, maybe there would be less infighting. What is the wind were in charge? Or the ocean? At times they are, as hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis can attest. At these times, creation takes over and we can remember our helplessness in the face of wind and water, fire and ice.

Our first response when hearing God’s response to Job as something very different than the God we rely on to help us through these troubled times. God seems so sarcastic and angry. The angry, vindictive God toward God’s created son, Job, is not the God we know. The God in whom we trust is loving, comforting. Or, as the psalmist in Psalm 46:1 wrote, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”

That is the God we have come to rely on. The God who loves us, regardless of our sins. The God who cares for us and comforts us in our time of suffering, and perhaps this is the better way for us to read and hear God’s response to Job in today’s scripture. Reading between the lines, if you will, us hear of God’s reassurance in God’s unfathomable ways. We must become more aware that it is not within humankind’s capacity to ever understand those ways or understand the why’s and how’s of the world in which we have been placed. As we say every; day in our prayers: “Thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.”

We would all like things to be cut and dried, black and white, with no frayed or gray edges in life. If I try my hardest to do good and not sin, then I will be saved. If I lead a sinful life, then I can expect some sort of cosmic punishment. Yet the story of Job, and indeed our own particular stories and the global story tell us that things don’t work this way. Life is not that cut and dried, or that reliable.

Everyday in the news, we hear about evil abroad in the world, seemingly gaining momentum faster than we can find the means to combat it with good. Think about how many people have lost all they had due the pandemic, while a few have prospered ten-fold as a result of their use of it. It’s hard to understand, but it is true. It is true in war time, and it is true amidst the war of a pandemic. And yet, dictators and despots do fall. Oppressiveness in all its evil forms does get rooted out. The good and holy values of humankind: kindness, humility will always prevail over cruelty and pride. Acceptance will always triumph over intolerance and rejection. Maybe not in the way or timeliness that we humans would prefer. But nature will find its balance, regardless of we mere mortals, and God’s will, will be done.

When we put things in perspective and listen to the God’s words spoken to Job today, we remember to hold on to hope that we find in God’s intention for all of Creation: love, mercy, grace, and all those good values that we have within each of us….all building to a powerful presence that has the magnificent power to rise above all our suffering.

This is God’s created world. It had, and has, a plan of which we are a vital and important part. We can take great hope from that understanding. At the end of the day, no matter our politics, our stance on vaccination or any other political argument, or even what is the best way to feed the dog, God’s created world and it’s perfection at its foundation, is beyond our capacity to understand it, but it is ours to trust and to faithfully accept and receive.

Our worship practices are important to each of us and to our community of faith. Our personal piety is important to us and to God. Our prayer life and our faithful discipline, our dedication and adherence to faithful living are all good and vitally important in our relationship with God. Yet none of these has anything to do with our status, how successful we have been, or might have been, as individuals or as part of the greater world. In fact, the massive sins of this sinful world, usually are beyond our control or have little or nothing to do with us at all, even though we are made to suffer the consequences of much of the world’s sinfulness. Not by God, but by the sins of the world.

And still God forgives us and forgives the world for our communal waywardness.

It is difficult for us to grasp the length, breadth, or depth of God’s creative power and, in a way, that is a comfort to know, if a little awe-inspiring, making us feel small. There is tension between this cosmic, structured order and our experience of suffering to many who don’t deserve it. And yet we hear the words of comfort, come down to us through the words of the saints and apostles themselves:

**Hear the Word of God to all who truly turn to him.**

**Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and   
I will refresh you.    Matthew 11:28**

**God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son,  
to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but  
have everlasting life.    John 3:16**

**This is a true saying, and worthy of all to be received,  
that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.  
1 Timothy 1:15**

**If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus  
Christ the righteous; and he is the perfect offering for our  
sins, and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole  
world.    1 John 2:1-2**

God doesn’t give us an answer to relieve this tension and who are we to expect God to answer to us about God’s intentions for the world, from its foundation until this day. It is enough to know that God took time to speak to Job and that God will always take time to speak to us. We may not readily understand the tone, or the intent, but we must always understand that God is active in the world and present to us, through good times and through times of suffering, and that God always has and always will hear our prayers and supplications, and God will always respond through God’s love and care for us. And for the opportunity to converse with God, in whatever way we choose, we give thanks.

Knowing this, perhaps we should rely faithfully upon the Word of God, and God’s guidance than the advice of humankind who claim to know all the answers. It’s a cosmic conversation in which we are invited to participate in every moment of our lives. We pray to God for direction, and we but need only to hear and accept one response, “Only God knows.”

Amen.

Written to the Glory of God

E.J. R. Culver+

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