



Grace Church

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Rector

WHIRLWIND AND SLAVE

Sermon for the 21st Sunday after Pentecost, October 18, 2015

Readings: Job 38:1-17, Mark 10:35-45

Sermon texts: Then the LORD answered Job out of the **whirlwind**: “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me.” Job 38:1

So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be **slave** of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” Mark 10:44-45

This morning we have two very different images of God: whirlwind and slave. In the book of Job, we witness the dramatic appearance of God on the scene, speaking out of the whirlwind in all of the majesty and awe of the king of the universe. In the gospel of Mark, we learn from Jesus what leadership in the kingdom looks like: as service, even to the point of appearing to be a slave: so humbly did the Son of God come to us, a homeless child, an itinerant healer, a suffering and crucified slave.

Wow. These are two very different pictures. Let’s take them in order.

In one, a man gets what he has asked for, the chance to speak to God, to ask why he received such terrible suffering, he, who had been a good and righteous man. Why do the innocent suffer? Why did Job, a prosperous and good man, become the plaything of evil? How could God allow this?

All of his friends told him must have have done something wrong, something to deserve this terrible fate. No, Job said, I know of nothing; I want to see God face to face, to present my case, to hear why this has happened.

His request was answered, but not in the way he thought it would. God appears in a whirlwind, a tempest, a tornado. Unlike the case of Elijah,

where God was not in the earthquake, fire or thunder—but in the still small voice—here God does speak from the power of nature’s fury. God rebukes Job—was he there when the foundations of the universe were laid, has he measured infinity, found the wellspring of light and the end of darkness? How little he understands, how much he presumes.

Job has no answer—he falls on his face before God—admitting he is but a creature of dust.

It is good to remember, on occasion, that we are made of dust and to dust we shall return. That we were made in the image of God—true—but to serve and care for God’s creation. We have been fruitful and multiplied, but we have not been alert until very recently to how we pushing the limits of the earth and threatening the future of humanity and many other species.

As the prophet said: “They sow the wind and reap the whirlwind” (Hosea 7:8).

We have sown the wind with carbon dioxide and the seas with carbonic acid; we have unleashed earth-shaking, climate-changing processes with little awareness of possible consequences and now scramble to contain the damage as the globe heats up. I have been reading Elizabeth Kolbert’s book, *The Sixth Extinction*, which looks at the history of earth and the five previous waves of catastrophic extinction. One was caused by a huge meteor—ending the age of dinosaurs. Others arose from different causes—and now a new mass extinction looms, caused by human activity. We have entered the anthropocene era—and far beyond the dreams of Job we have penetrated the secrets of nature, explored the beginning of time and seen to the edge of the universe. We have harnessed great power—but we still are children playing with guns. God is speaking to us out of the whirlwind today—out of the fires, the floods, the hurricanes. Will we listen now?

The other image of God is quite different. When Jesus answered the request of the brothers John and James to have seats at his side when he assumes the throne of glory, he first warned them that the seat comes with a price: the bitter cups of suffering and death. Can they drink from his cup and undergo his baptism, he asked them. We can, they said. Well, we’ll see about that. But when the others heard about the brothers’ request, they were indignant. Everyone wants first place. No one wants to sacrifice their life. Jesus took the occasion to teach them about leadership in the kingdom. In this world, those who are considered kings and lords rule it over those beneath them. But in God’s realm, those who lead are called to serve. He used himself as an example, saying that the Son of Man comes “not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

We hear an echo of this teaching in Paul’s letter to the Philippians:

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Phil 2:)

A word about the Greek words *doulos*: (*bond-servant or slave*) and *diakonos* (*servant, from which we get “deacon”*). All leaders are called to serve; and those who would be king, or foremost leader, even more so, such that the king to whom every knee will bow, became the slave, whose life was given to save all. The point here is not to suggest that Jesus was *bound* to serve, but that he *freely* served. Just so, God

service is perfect *freedom* (Book of Common Prayer 99, “A Collect for Peace”). We are most truly free from what Paul calls the bondage of sin when he submit to the yoke of Christ. This is, of course, none other than the cross of human suffering we must each bear. Yet somehow, in the mysterious alchemy of the spirit, we find the way of the cross none other than the way of life and peace (the BCP again, “A Collect for Fridays”). For the cross is not just suffering, but suffering for a redemptive purpose.

This cannot be explained, only experienced. But stories, both true and fictional, help us imagine. You know the story in many versions. It is told in *The Hunger Games* when Katniss steps forward to take the place of her younger sister. It happened in recent history when a Polish/German Catholic priest and Franciscan brother was imprisoned by the Germans in one of their concentration camps for his help to the Resistance and for sheltering Jews. One day, after three prisoners managed to escape, the commandant ordered ten prisoners to be starved to death. The whole camp gathered in the yard. The commandant walked past row after silent row, each with his eyes downcast—pointing to this one or that. One man cried out after being selected, “my wife, my children.” Next to him stood the priest. And he said, no, take me. I have no family.” His name was Maximilian Kolbe. He was canonized in 1982 by Pope John Paul, who called him “the patron saint of our difficult century.”

To sacrifice one’s freedom, one’s time and resources, even one’s life, to save another, to serve the greater good, to save the planet—this is the choice some make, this is the choice that Jesus made. It is the choice no tyrant can take away. For you do not truly possess your life or your freedom unless you can let it go. This is true in every part of your life. As we talked about last week, many things that are goods in themselves, become burdens and barriers to entering the kingdom of God—unless they can be let go. But why let go unless the cause is compelling, the call is clear? Compelling enough to overcome fear and create that sense of passion and purpose that marks true leaders.

Such, my friends, is the call of Jesus, such is the way of life we call Christian—often far too easily. For as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, another martyr of conscience, wrote, too often we seek cheap grace, and fail to count the true cost of discipleship. Nevertheless, God is still speaking out of the whirlwind. And Jesus is calling you both to follow and lead.

In the name of Christ, Amen.

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