

## Three Hard Readings

We have quite a trio of readings this morning: the beginnings of the book of Job and the letter to the Hebrews, and Jesus' uncompromising statement on divorce. I happened to find my sermon from three years ago on these readings, and I liked it so much that momentarily I was tempted to use it again. That's not fair to you, however, even if you don't remember it. One of my uncles, a Lutheran minister for over fifty years, once told me that when he was in his seventies he found it necessary to reuse a sermon for the first time. It really saddened him to do that. If my uncle could go that many years without repeating himself, I can surely go three.

Over time I have come to appreciate the book of Job, at least parts of it. During the next few weeks we'll get to hear the gist of the story. Today is the beginning of Job's misery. Next week he'll complain bitterly to God. The week after that God will speak to Job out of the whirlwind, basically saying, who do you think you are? By the end of the month everything Job has lost will be restored to him. What we'll miss are all of the platitudinous posturings of Job's friends who try to console him. Be glad for that. Those are the parts I can do without.

What I like about Job's story is its astonishing truthfulness. Life does not seem fair. The book expresses that truth in ways that made sense to the ancients, but that can become an impediment to us. I encourage you to hear this book as it was intended, as a story that tells us some very important truths about ourselves and the world we live in. Don't be put off by elements that sound foreign to our twenty-first-century ears.

We're introduced to those odd elements today. After Job himself is briefly introduced, we find ourselves in a heavenly court presided over by the Lord God. It's a setting that would have made sense to those who were used to kings and courts. One of those assembled is Satan, a word that means Adversary in Hebrew. Even with my scientific background I find it useful to talk about Satan, because I firmly believe that there is evil in this world greater than any human being. We see evidence of that every day. Personifying that evil as Satan gives us a way to talk about and confront it. In Job, Satan is described as "going to and fro on the earth." What a great image! The temptation to evil is everywhere, looking for some chink, some opening, into which it can move. No wonder St. Paul told us to put on the whole armor of Christ!

Satan has already incited God to act against Job in earlier verses, where he lost all his children and possessions. Now Satan incites God to allow him to act against Job's own person. Notice how in this story evil cannot work unless it has the permission of God. One might conclude that God allows evil. I don't think that's where the story is headed, however. Rather, it is saying that everything in all creation, even Satan himself, is ultimately under God's control. As Christians we believe that God has put all things under Jesus Christ. Satan has been conquered by the cross and empty tomb, although the reality of that redemption is still being worked out.

After Job becomes afflicted with loathsome sores, his wife tells him that he curse God and die. That may sound callous, but it also can be seen as compassionate. She doesn't want to see him suffer so much. But here, as in the rest of the book, Job is remarkably stubborn. He repeatedly insists on his innocence and his integrity. He will challenge God to a day in the heavenly court so that he can present his case and defend himself. At the same time, we are told that "in all this Job did not sin with his lips." Does that mean that he sinned in his heart? Is there more going on here than we are told? What seems like such a straightforward folk tale begins to take on more depth and meaning than the surface shows. That's why Job continues to engage me each time I read it. This mine is deep and rich. We'll hear more from it in coming weeks.

If you were uncomfortable after the reading from Job, I'm sure you were even more so after hearing the uncompromising words about divorce from the mouth of Jesus. He leaves no wiggle room. If only the disciples hadn't asked him to elaborate on what he had said to the Pharisees! I'm sure they, too, were challenged by his clarification. The temptation is to somehow make Jesus' words less harsh. I'm heartened by one commentator on this passage, who urges us not to weaken Jesus' statement, but instead to recognize "any broken marriage for what it is, a breach of God's standard, and...any resultant provision for divorce not as good, but as...a regrettable concession" to hardness of heart. Or as our *Book of Common Prayer* puts it, "Marriage is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, deliberately." Yet we must accept that there are times when what has been entered into with faith, hope, and love has become something other than what God and two people intended. Our world is still broken.

Curiously, Mark the Evangelist changes the subject immediately after Jesus issues his pronouncement on divorce, as though even Mark doesn't want to stay there very long. He moves to parents bringing children to Jesus. Mark has just talked about children in the previous chapter in a passage on which Father Sinclair

preached two weeks ago. Here Jesus rebukes those who try to keep the children away. Are they too noisy or messy or unimportant? It certainly won't be the last time people try to keep children from experiencing Jesus. Maybe that's why we have two stained glass windows with that image. We need the reminder that Jesus welcomes children, including here in church, even if they *are* noisy and messy.

Our third reading, from the letter to the Hebrews, is not discomfoting, just difficult. It's more of an extended sermon than a letter, with closely reasoned arguments supported by Scripture quotations. The main point is to show that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of prophecies in the Hebrew Bible. "Long ago God spoke...by the prophets," it begins, "but in these last days" God has also "spoken to us by a Son." For me, that gets at the heart of the Christian faith. There are other ways of encountering and knowing God, but I do believe that Jesus Christ is God's best and fullest self-revelation. Through Christ we encounter God most fully. Through Jesus we also see what it means to be fully human. That's the key to understanding the two natures of Christ, divine and human, "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation."

Today we heard what happens when we fall short of that full humanity. Job will become so focused on his own integrity that he will lose track of the greatness and power of God. Jesus reminds us that making concessions to failing relationships are exactly that – concessions. It's not the way God wants the world to be. It's not the way *we* want the world to be! And because God has given humans free will, the ability to choose which way to turn, God has freely relinquished some of his power and control. That gives us the freedom to turn toward good or toward evil.

Three years ago I characterized today's readings as two describing the way the world is, not the way God wants it to be, and one describing what God has done about it. I still think that's true. The Bible directly addresses the darkness of life, and Jesus continues to challenge us by his words. Yet through Jesus we also see a better way – not only a better way of glorifying God, but also a better way to be the people whom God calls us to be. Satan will not have the last word. God will. For that, thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

[Pentecost 20: Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16. The commentator mentioned is R. T. France in *The Gospel of Mark*, a volume in The New International Greek Testament Commentary. The four "withouts" come from the Chalcedonian Definition of Christ, page 864 in the *Book of Common Prayer*.]