

**Sermon for Proper 23(B)
Year B**

[RCL] Psalm 22:1-15; Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

The Depths of Despair and the Promise of the Kingdom

The readings from the Psalm and Job seem to contrast sharply with the gospel and epistle lessons appointed for this day.

In Psalm 22 and in Job we hear the human cry of abandonment and grief caused by the perceived absence of God. By contrast, in the mysterious letter to the Hebrews we are assured of a God who is indeed present to us; God shares in our suffering, the author writes, through Jesus, our high priest. And in the gospel of Mark we are given the promise that we can indeed enter into the presence of God, referred to here as *eternal life*, by the grace of God. Let us then look at each of these readings.

Job puts into words the experience of so many human beings who cry out to God only to be met by silence:

“Oh, that I knew where I might find him,
that I might come even to his dwelling!
“If I go forward, he is not there;
or backward, I cannot perceive him;
on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him,
I turn to the right, and I cannot see him.”

In plain language, God is nowhere. God is absent to Job. In our day, in this advanced 21st century, what comes to mind immediately is the plight of refugees pouring into Europe by the thousands, escaping the horrors of war and utter loss of safety. One wonders: what are they feeling about *their* God? If they could articulate their pain, it would sound very much like Job’s.

Or to pluck out an example of a fellow Christian from our tragic 20th century history: We see Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1945 sitting in his cold prison in Tegel, echoing the agony of the psalmist and of Jesus on the cross: “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?”

Bonhoeffer, one of the very few Christian pastors to protest the treatment of Jews in the terrible Hitler years in Germany, was imprisoned for a long time and then executed following one of the last orders of that murderous dictator. In a letter from prison he writes:

“God would have us know that we must live as [human beings] who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us. . . . Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross.” These paradoxical sentences are as tough to listen to as the cry of the psalmist and the lament of Job. And yet they are rejuvenating in their honesty and faith, unlike the silly and empty declarations of what constitutes Christian faith that we hear in the public arena today by people who have no idea how costly Christianity is. Bonhoeffer’s words are life giving because they are the words of one who understood the *good news*: that the gospel makes no sense without the tragedy and darkness of the cross.

“God has made my heart faint,” Job acknowledges. “The Almighty has terrified me. If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!”

Terrible words and utterly truthful; if we have never felt such fear, then we will have difficulty understanding the good news of the kingdom that emerges from the cross. If we have never been confronted by such darkness, we will miss the light. In theological language, we cannot experience resurrection without the death of Good Friday.

In the Letter to the Hebrews the writer reminds his readers who were being tested by severe persecution and suffering that they are not alone:

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

By comparison, the gospel story at first reading doesn't sound so tough, does it? Here comes a lovely young man who is obviously attracted by the message of the charismatic prophet Jesus who speaks words of truth and who heals the sick. How exciting to be in his presence. The man, referred to elsewhere as a 'rich young ruler,' comes to Jesus prepared; he is decent and he loves his religion, as do we who are gathered in church today. He is in earnest as he asks an important question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” One cannot help wondering: What kind of answer is he expecting? Jesus gives him a rather obvious Jewish answer. “Keep the commandments.” What a relief the rich young ruler must have felt. “I've done all this,” he replies, “I've kept the commandments,” and we can almost hear his sigh. He is probably ready to go away, feeling that he is already in, a member of the inheritance club. And then something strange happens. Jesus looks at him and sees a great potential for the kingdom. He loves him. He wants him as one of his followers. He must have reminded Jesus of Peter and John when he first called them. Jesus does not coerce; he gives a choice. Here is a man who is already doing the churchy things: he observes the law, he fulfills his duties as a member of a family and of a religious tradition. But in order to become a follower he must give up the one thing that is most precious to him, the thing that stands between him and his ability to become a disciple. “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. . . then come follow me.” The man, who a moment ago had been so confident, was shocked and went away grieving, “for he had many possessions.”

And suddenly, the story that seemed so sunny and hopeful, becomes a tough one to listen to. For it forces us to ask the question: What is it that I cannot give up so that I can follow Jesus? This gospel encounter makes it clear that for those who have much, the great difficulty lies in giving up their possessions. But even those of us who have few possessions are tied down to a treasure that may not be counted as money or things. What obsession, what addiction, what personal pride, what ambition, what other love keeps us from loving God enough? It sounds so difficult that we are forced to ask with those present that day in Palestine: “Then who can be saved?”

The answer that Jesus gives turns us from ourselves to God's power and grace. Once we reach the point of knowing that nothing *we* can do will save us, that with Bonhoeffer and with the writer of the letter to the Hebrews we recognize that God knows our suffering because he suffers with us, then we are ready to ask, What can I do to inherit the kingdom, to have eternal life, to be saved, if we are to use an expression familiar and misunderstood by many.

Again, Jesus' answer is difficult. Give up the self and follow me, he tells us, for the one who is first will be last, and the one who is last will be first. These biblical passages together show us quite clearly and rather painfully that the values of the kingdom are radically different from the values of our society. The darkness is necessary for the light to come. Those who are last in the world become first

in God's kingdom. The God who seems absent is the God who is with us and, to save us, God lets himself be pushed on the cross. Thanks be to God.

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