

Job and Bartimaeus – Ruth Huston

Job 42.1-6; 10-17, Psalm 34.1-8, Hebrews 7.23-28, Mark 10.46-52

One of the commentaries that I consult regularly when preparing for a sermon says that “these texts are grouped arbitrarily and do not constitute any thematic unity.” That took a lot of pressure off on the one hand, but on the other, it challenged me to look even harder for some connections among the texts that this particular commentator couldn’t detect.

And I came up with a few. One obvious one, of course, is the seeing theme. Job says, “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you— ah. . . now I get it! I didn’t know you before. I talked about you. I heard about you. But now I see you, I really see you. And when we read that text along with the Markan story of Bartimaeus, we don’t have to imagine very far the obvious connection. Bart is blind—he doesn’t see, or does he? In fact, doesn’t he see long before he sees? Bartimaeus had his eyes open before Jesus ever restored his physical sight. In calling out, “Lord have mercy!”, he sees “who Jesus is” and where to follow him and that’s something only the unblind can see.

Another possible connection among Job, the gospel and the psalm is on the mercy and intention of God to give good things to the humble ones of his creation: The psalmist is a humble one who has no power to save himself. The acrostic celebrates God’s ability and willingness to do what can’t be done by the speaker. Bartimaeus is a perfect example of what one of these humble ones looks like. He’s the subject of the psalm who asks for and receives transformative mercy from Jesus. And of course, Job’s humble response to God from out of the whirlwind prompts God to mercifully and generously heap tangible wealth on Job. Why, we could even connect the Hebrews passage to this theme—and may I say ever so humbly that the fact that I can connect this epistle at any level with the morning’s other texts is frankly nothing short of genius—Hebrews demonstrates that God’s mercy is not whimsical or capricious, but is fully reliable, given once for all in Jesus the Great High Priest. All these texts invite confidence in God’s good intention for God’s creatures, whom he loves supremely.

We could focus on what happens to us when we have a profound encounter with God. The psalmist is healed. Bart is cured. Job’s healed. We could draw a modern application that anytime we have an encounter with God we’re profoundly changed. I would dare say that many of us can recount times when we’ve met God and those memories carry us during our darkest days of doubt and crises of belief. They’re not to be eschewed. Our experiences with God are important, certainly.

And if I were preaching at almost any other place, I would choose one of those themes. But this is St. Paul’s and you folks are radical and so very thoughtful. You give me courage to preach on themes that I might not have courage to preach elsewhere. So I’d like to spend the rest of our time this morning on the troubled endings of the book of Job. I’m choosing this sermon

because I think that the Bible responds profoundly to the deepest problems of life and faith, but that does not mean that the Bible has one answer, or a final answer, or even consistent answers to the problem of life and faith. We have a tendency, sometimes, to think of Scripture as if it were a train on a single track heading determinedly for its final destination. But the Bible is not really like that. One commentator has likened it to a deep coal mine with many seams, some of which are rich with coal and others not; some when pursued seem to be endless, while other seams become thinner and thinner. So, just as the community of Job mined for coal when thinking about these problems of life, let's join our voices, our considerations and do some mining of our own.

We know that beginnings and endings are really important, no less important when we consider a book's beginnings and endings. We've been sitting with Job now for 4 weeks and today's OT lection calls us to the ending. Therein lies a big problem. Many commentators think that the happily-ever-after ending we currently have, verses 7-17, isn't the really real ending—that it's been tacked on to tie up all the loose ends. If that's true, we're left with verses 1-6 as the ending. Our hopes and expectations are high. Finally we're going to get some answers to the grand questions Job has posed to God for 30 plus chapters and which his 3 friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, in a great debate with 3 cycles—it's a work of literary art really—attempt to answer his questions from out of their worldview. They gave him what they knew to give—conventional theological explanations. They knew why Job was suffering. He had sinned and everybody knows that suffering is a direct consequence of sinning. But Job doesn't buy it—he's *tam and yasar*—faithful and righteous. There must be another reason. So Job lodges a lawsuit against God. He takes God to court. He's suing God for dereliction of duty. For 36 chapters Job rails on God and God is nowhere to be seen or heard—God is AWOL. We last heard from him in chapter 2! FINALLY, in chapter 38, God shows up out of the whirlwind. We read this passage last week.

Let me just say, God does not look good in this whirlwind. God comes across like a puffed up peacock who's insulted that a peon like Job would dare to question him, as if God is beyond being accountable to God's creation. If I saw that kind of bully behavior on the playground, I'd go fix it, and at the least give the bully a detention. Most teachers are aware that if a student asks an embarrassingly difficult question, one way to handle it is to raise our voice, act insulted, and make the student feel silly and presumptuous for having asked. Could it be that the God of the Book of Job has learned this technique?

Here's another seam to consider, the Bible on numerous occasions gives us permission to question God as Job did. Abe did it—why, he even chastised God for not acting like God should and embarrassing him in front of the Egyptians. Moses did it numerous times, especially in those hot desert wandering years, the prophets did it—come on, God, how can you let the Babylonians destroy us? They're way worse than we ever thought of being, the psalmists did it—why do you hide yourself from me, why don't take of the injustice of the world, kill my enemies so I can be vindicated. So why is God getting so bent out of shape because Job questions God's motives.

Job acquiesces! Under this barrage of a divine tour de force, Job yields, “I give, I give—uncle! You win!” Job repents, he changes his mind and turns away from his current thinking—a new thought has dawned on him. “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.” Perhaps he means he really got it about who God is, and the nature of God’s power. Job doesn’t just hear, he understands with two vital senses.

But what kind of victory is this? And how does Job’s humble response bring any resolution? Somehow being reminded that God is all powerful, sovereign, in control, creator of the universe reconciles Job’s pain, devastation, loss? Realizing that God is God and not Job is somehow supposed to comfort him. Would you ever send a sympathy card to anyone with this message? Dear Bob, I know that all 10 of your kids have died, that you’ve just been laid off from your job, your house is in foreclosure, your investments just tanked, your wife has told you to curse God and die, your skin is crawling with boils, and your bff’s don’t want you coming around anymore cuz you’re nothing but a loser. But isn’t it great to know that God is still in control and we just can’t understand his ways. Love, the Hustons. P.S. See you tomorrow at the funerals. We’re sending flowers. Doesn’t work, does it? That God has the sovereignty, the ability to do something about all this suffering and he doesn’t do it cuz what, he’s a mystery and we just can’t understand his ways? That’s just plain heartless. This seems to me to be a seam that’s getting thin.

Let’s keep mining this ending. Perhaps what is really going on here is resignation. Job repents of trying to hold God accountable and he resigns himself. Things are as they are. The rain falls on the just and the unjust. War, famine, disease, and death are not sent by some interventionist God to punish, nor are they withheld to reward. I like this piece of coal. Such an ending would seem to be true to life, making this book more in line with the experiences of those who suffer. All the loose ends aren’t tied up in a neat little denouement. So these are some of the seams to consider with 1-6 as the ending.

Let’s do some mining of the other ending, verses 7-17. Now, if we like all the loose ends being tied up, we’ll prefer this happily-ever-after ending. Once Job grovels in dust and ashes, God restores all his possessions, giving him twice as much as he had before. Job’s brothers and sisters reunite with him and share their wealth with him; Job’s flocks and herds multiply rapidly, surpassing their former numbers; and Job himself fathers 10 more children, his 3 daughters—Jemimah, Keziah, and Keren-happuch, are more beautiful than any other women in the land, why Job even goes above and beyond the customs of his time by allowing his daughters to inherit from his wealth along with his sons. God grants Job an extraordinarily long life, until finally “Job died, old and full of days.”

Now, I love a happy ending probably more than the average bear. I read the last page of a book before the first to ensure a happy ending. If I hear that a movie doesn’t end happily, most likely I won’t watch it. And the happily ever after can be quite contrived and manipulated. I have great tolerance for happy-ending manipulation. I can even know that I’m being manipulated and I don’t mind. But this happy ending? It goes way beyond even my tolerance

for happy endings. I would have preferred that Job didn't get anything restored, but that he continued to live from out of a worldview that said that bad things happen to good people. I would have preferred if God had come alongside Job in the form of his friends and sat with him, suffering, and. . . well just maybe God did that after all. In verse 11, notice one of the ways that God restored Job: through a supportive community. Job's family and friends participate in his restoration. He gets by with a little help from his friends. He was not left to rebuild his broken life without help. And the community begins by eating with him, and not in their clean homes, but they go to him, an outcast, an unclean under the curse of God. Everybody knows that Jews don't eat in unclean places with unclean people. Then they show him sympathy and comfort him because of all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him. Sounds like they're acknowledging Job's loss. That's important stuff to one who suffers—I know you're suffering. But they offer more than words and kind gestures. Verse eleven says that each of them gave him a gift — a piece of money and a gold ring. Their support is tangible. Is that why we bring food when someone dies?

So where do we stand in all this coal? What can we say about these endings?

*Can we affirm that we can trust in God and recognize our human limitations. But this trust, like Job, comes only after struggle—even struggle with God.

*Can we affirm that it's OK to quarrel with God, to tell the truth about God as we understand it and even to hold God accountable for God's actions?

*Can we affirm that we periodically need to challenge conventional wisdom of the day, We need to keep visiting what we hold to be true, keep on evaluating, keep on reforming our life of faith.

*Can we affirm that while often sin and suffering are connections that can be made, we ought not to absolutize that connection. There are just too many exceptions to the rule, Job being one of them.

*Can we affirm that for some sufferers, the knowledge that God is a mystery and we'll never fully understand his ways, is a comfort?

*And finally, can we affirm that it's the community surrounding the sufferer that brings restoration.