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Georgetown Presbyterian Church, Washington, DC
October 25, 2009

Hearsay

Text: Job 42:1-6, 10-17

Over the course of the last month we have been reading from the book of *Job* for our Old Testament lessons, although neither Merritt nor I have preached on it to date. However, as I look back over the last month, perhaps it would have been appropriate to dig into it earlier, especially here in Washington. I mean, after all, how can your team play five straight winless teams, and only beat two of them? How can you lose to the Detroit Lions? Even if it was the case that the Lions tried extra hard that day, a sort of revenge by Detroit on Washington, for failing to bail out the automakers, the Lions aren't very good. So, I presume, if you are a Redskins fans you must sympathize with Job.

Appropriate as it might be in this context, however, *that* Job-like experience is not exactly what I want us to think about in considering the concluding verses of *Job* that we read this morning. Rather, I want us to think about some of the even more unsettling aspects of that book, which is one of the most unsettling of all books in the Bible.

The book of *Job* is often understood to be not only a vivid portrayal of the problem of evil, but the Bible's answer to it. It certainly is the first, for one cannot imagine the question of "why do the innocent suffer?" being represented more graphically than it is in the case of Job. Job is a righteous man who is smitten by God's prosecuting angel in order to test him and to see if his faith is real or not, to see if he is religious just because of the rewards he seems to get from it, or if he really is righteous and trusts God for God's sake. So, all that Job accumulated in his life – children, property, reputation, health itself – is taken from him, and he is left on a trash

heap, scraping his sores. The only thing left to him is a wife who tells him to curse God and die, and three friends who stand afar off, as if they could catch whatever it is that he has, and who then proceed to lecture him on theology and morals. Each one of them tells him that he *must* have done something wrong. If one suffers it is because he has done something wrong. So repent, and maybe God will be favorable to Job again, they say. Great friends; there are more like a grating and essential part of his affliction than they are a comfort.

But Job knows that he hasn't done anything wrong, at least not so much that it deserves treatment such as he is getting by the divine permission. He tells his tormenting friends that. That isn't the worst part of it. It isn't so much the seeming unfairness that bothers Job more than even his physical affliction, it is that he can't confront God and find out why this is happening to him. His problem is that he can't understand; suffering that is meaningless is suffering, indeed. That kind of suffering is not just hard, it goes right through us and nails us inert to a board, for we can't live without meaning, without a sense of why this is happening. We can endure a whole lot if we know what it is for, but absence and lack of meaning completely defeats us. So what Job really wants is a hearing before God, although he knows that in front of God he can never be in the right. Who could be? But at least a hearing might help, and that is what he isn't getting.

But then God does answer Job out of the whirlwind. Now, to those who are seeking in what God says an answer as to why the innocent suffer, of why God let this happen to Job, God's answer is frustrating and disappointing. God buttonholes Job, and asks him just where he was when God created the world. Just who does Job think he is, he who "darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" This is no answer, it just seems like more bullying. If what you want here is a justification of God's ways, then God's answer here would seem to be a complete failure.

But I think that looking for an answer here to the question of why the innocent suffer

misunderstands what God is saying – and misunderstands what Job hears. For whatever it is that Job hears, it is something that causes him to say in response to God: “I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know....I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I... repent in dust and ashes.” These lines are surely the hardest part of the book of *Job* for us to understand.

Now, I do not entirely know what Job heard in God’s answer that made him repent this way, and to say that he had known God before only by hearsay, but now he sees him face to face. As Wittgenstein once remarked, “You can’t hear God speak to someone else, you can hear him only if you are being addressed.” But there may be a clue in that remark as to what has gone on here. What is that clue? It is that God is not giving an answer to a philosophical question, not even the one that asks “why do the innocent suffer?” God is, instead, speaking *to* Job, speaking to him directly and personally. God is not giving an answer that could be understood by anybody who stood on the outside, that could be understood by anybody, anywhere, anytime. God is speaking directly to Job. To hear God, like Job, you have to be on the inside. You have to give up hearsay and second and third hand knowledge. You have to quit trying to be the universal man or woman, anybody, anywhere, anytime. You have to be the one who is being addressed, right here, right now. And if that is what God is doing, that is, addressing Job where Job stood, then that personal address is the most remarkable part of the book. It is why this is *Scripture*, that is God’s revelation of himself to a human being, and not philosophy.

Simone Weil once said that a mind who thinks only in words and language is enclosed in a prison. Why? Because such a mind is limited to understanding the number of relations that language can make present to it at any one time. If you are smart, that may be a lot; if you aren’t that is only a few. But in either case, what you think is limited. A finite mind can’t hold an

infinite number of relations in mind. Thus she suggested: “The intelligent man who is proud of his intelligence is like a condemned man who is proud of his large cell.” Her point applies very well to Job’s three dogmatic friends; it even applies to Job himself before God speaks to him, although Job clearly strains at the limits of his prison.

But then God speaks to him. He touches him. He gives Job a vision of the whole world at once, an insight into the whole and its beauty – its beginning, and its concourse in the flowing of the waters, and the dryness of land, of the alternation of the seasons, and of the beasts on land, and the fish in the sea, including the great Leviathan who sports there. He gives him a vision of the wisdom that God has put in the inward parts and of the understanding that he has put in the mind. Job sees these wonders all at once, and he breaks out of his prison. He starts to see things from God’s perspective, and he starts to wonder. He is filled with wonder, and in his wonder, he goes beyond his suffering, he goes beyond his questions, and he feels God’s presence, and in that presence he now knows what is too wonderful to know, and he gives up knowledge by hearsay. He repents of his second hand knowledge. What he says from here on in will be different than the claptrap of other people.

The friends, however, who remain in their prison, are roundly chastised by God, because, as God says, they have “not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.” Because they were content with their prison, they knew nothing of God. Because Job questioned, he finally broke through to a new, direct, personal sense of God.

This personal sense of God is important to us as we celebrate Reformation Sunday. For at its heart the Reformation was about the knowledge of God that comes, not from hearsay, but from the experience of God’s having spoken to us. It was a matter of breaking out of the prison of what others say, and moving into the light and freedom of God speaking to us, of the personal,

experiential knowledge of God, which is not at all the same thing as mere emotionalism. The historic principles of the Presbyterian Church talk about our faith as “experimental,” by which is meant that faith is forged in the give and take of the experience of God that comes from reading Scripture, from prayer and from partaking of the sacraments we have been given. This is not knowledge on the basis of anybody’s say-so. Faith comes from encounter. Moreover, the Reformers thought that this is not an experience that is reserved for a select few. It is an experience that belongs to all Christians, should they seek it, and Calvin and Luther were insistent that they should seek it.

That is the heart of the Reformation, and what we as a Reformed church believe. The knowledge of God, given by the Word that God speaks to us, is what faith and church and eternal life is about as far as we are concerned. How well have we kept this heritage?

A short while back, Bruce Douglas, who is well known to many members of this congregation told me this story. Bruce, a Presbyterian, teaches at Georgetown University, a Catholic institution, and one that is run by the Jesuits. One day, a Catholic colleague said to him, “You Protestants believe in an educated laity, right?” Bruce replied “Yes.” “And you believe that all believers should know and interpret the Bible, right?” his friend continued. “Yes,” Bruce again replied. “So how’s it going?” the friend asked.

Now, this story might be told a couple of different ways, all leading to the same point. The friend might have said and asked, for instance: “You believe in the priesthood of all believers, right?” Or he might have asked, “And so that means, that the laity are crucial to the governance of the church, right? The church depends on their knowledge and experience to function?” To all those questions we would have to answer, “yes.” “So,” we would then be asked, “how’s it going?”

That is a question we need to ask on this Reformation Sunday. We need to ask, “how’s it going?” The heart of what we stand for is a knowledge of God that comes from God’s word to us. It is a knowledge that is not a matter of hearsay. It is a knowledge of the heart, which is far deeper than philosophy and far, far deeper than emotion, for the heart is the center of our being, mind, strength and soul. It is where God’s Spirit makes it’s impact felt when it touches our spirits. And so with respect to knowing God and with respect to educating believers, and with respect to sharing the joyful knowledge of God with others, and with respect to governing the church, and participating as people who know God by God’s word, indeed, “how’s it going?”

That is a question we first need to ask of ourselves. How is it going with us as people of faith? Have we been satisfied with hearsay? Have we pushed beyond everything to hear God’s Word, and to find that one pearl of great price? Have we done so by study? Have we done so by prayer? Have we come here often and sat still so that God can feed us in the sacrament, what Augustine and Calvin both called “a visible Word?” Or have we assumed that the vision of the kingdom is ours for just being a good person, “good” being defined on our terms? Or, for thinking that Christian ethics consists in little more than being nice to the checkout girl at the Safeway? Or, that Christ’s mission in the world is something we can give to out of what is left over from our use? Do we have the knowledge of the heart that comes from listening?

And we also need to ask this question of ourselves as the Church. How’s it going with the church that believes in the priesthood of all believers? Are we pushing beyond hearsay and clichés, hoping to feel good after a sermon, but not expected to do anything really about it? Are we pushing beyond the habit of letting the pastor, or a few people do it all? Are we telling the Good News because it is good, or are we a bit embarrassed about even saying the name “Jesus” out loud other than at times such as when we miss a putt? Are we seeking to make sure that

everybody hears, really hears what God has to say to them?

Those are tough questions. Those are questions that both Calvin and Luther expected the church and the people in it to be always asking themselves. They are probably not questions we like to ask, since, I suspect, the implied answers always tend to make us feel guilty. That's probably why, cynics think, *Calvin* asked them and made others ask them. He, after all, believed in original sin and never let up on telling people about it. But the fact of the matter is that while Calvin was pretty realistic about sin, what he really believed in was God's power to transform everybody's life and to speak to everybody and that sin, original or otherwise, does not have the final power to rule anybody's life. Indeed, Calvin defined faith as the sure and certain knowledge that *God is for us*. It is the knowledge that God wants us to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation and that God will give us the power to be like that. It is the knowledge that God doesn't want to be known by hearsay, but that God wants to speak to us directly, to everyone of us, and that having spoken we together will live by the truth of that Word that God speaks; that we will live with heart.

That then is the real question. Indeed, we have to ask "how's it going? But in asking that, understand that what that means is not so much how we are doing, but how's God doing with us? It means "what are we letting God do with us?" Are we listening? Are we a people who hear in their hearts? Those are important questions, because God wants to do everything with us, with everyone of us, and everywhere. So, let us then hear what God has to say, and let us never be satisfied with hearsay.