

“Longing for a Day in Court”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
October 10, 2021 – Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 23
Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Mark 10:17-31

In last week’s sermon, I talked about the great competition underway known as Fat Bear Week. This week-long event on the website explore.org allowed people to vote to determine which of the brown bears that had gathered along the Brooks River in Alaska’s Katmai National Park had fattened up the most over the course of the summer by feasting on upon upstream swimming salmon.

The verdict is now in: Otis is officially the winner of this year’s Fat Bear Week! Old Otis, who at about 25 years of age is described by the National Park Service as the “portly patriarch of paunch,” chowed down on so many salmon that he took down all rivals, including a much younger bear named Walker in Fat Bear Week’s final matchup, winning the title of Fattest Bear for a record fourth time, proving that old Otis is the GOAT of bears!

Also last Sunday, we read passages from the opening chapters of the book of Job, in which we were introduced to the good, upright, and prosperous character named Job. We were also introduced to God in a heavenly courtroom scene and a character our translation names as Satan, who is not actually given the name Satan in the original Hebrew, but, rather, is called ha-satan, meaning The Adversary or The Accuser, either of which is a much better translation. We read about how this character, The Accuser, comes before God in a heavenly courtroom scene, and after pleading a case before God, is allowed by God to wreck Job’s life to test if Job’s righteous and worshipful ways will continue once his prosperity and health is stripped from him, or if Job is only righteous and worshipful because he has been blessed by God with prosperity and health. And so Job loses everything he has, including his own health, being inflicted with terrible sores from his head to his feet. As poor Job sat in the dirt, scraping his painful sores with the edge of a broken piece of pottery, his wife begged him to curse God so that he might die and in death be relieved of his affliction and find peace. But Job, even as he scraped his sores, refused to curse God and remained upright in continuing to worship God.

In the chapters between last week's reading and today's, Job is visited by friends, all of whom try to convince him that his terrible predicament is somehow the result of his own sinful actions. Their theological position echoed that of the biblical Proverbs, which tell us that if you just trust in God with all your being, leaning not on your own understanding, God will make straight and smooth the paths of your life (Prov. 3:5-6). This was a common view in Israel, that God rewards the righteous with straight paths, that is peace and prosperity, while actively punishing the wicked with paths that were crooked and rough. And so, viewing Job's plight from this perspective, Job's friends concluded that his affliction was a sign that he had somehow been wicked and was facing the wrath of God as punishment for his sinfulness, that Job's paths were clearly not smooth and straight because of his own error.

But upright Job knew that this was not the case. He was a righteous person, not an evil-doer, and remained so after his life fell to pieces. His suffering couldn't have been the result of his own wickedness. Job knew that there was an injustice in his suffering. He didn't deserve it. And so, in today's reading, he makes his case to his friends and longs for his day when he can plead his case in the heavenly courtroom that an injustice has been done to him.

His case is a complaint against the injustice of bad things happening to good people, a case that not only Job could make, but a case that many in Israel who suffered seemingly for no reason could make. It's a complaint that people throughout time could make, and one that we can make today. We ask, why is it that bad things happen to good people?

Job wondered about this. He wondered if the reason for his own suffering was that he was abandoned by God. He wondered, is God now here? Or is God nowhere?

Like Job, when we suffer, we might also wonder about the presence of God. We question this especially when we've done all the right things, religiously followed all the rules, and lived by the commandments of God, even following today's teaching of Jesus to give our wealth away to support the poor and to give up everything else for the sake of following Jesus. But sometimes, even when we do what is right and good, we hurt and suffer. And in these times, so we ask with the psalmist, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Ps. 22:1).

We ask this, just as the psalmist did, and just as Jesus did when he suffered unjustly upon a Roman cross. It is helpful to remember that at the heart of our faith is the belief that God, who created all that is, is a self-limiting God, even taking on the limits of human flesh. Through Jesus, the Man of Sorrow, God who experienced humanity fully was completely shattered by human brokenness. Our self-limiting God understands unjust suffering and sorrow and feelings of abandonment.

But just as Jesus was faithful to his mission until the end, even while wondering about the presence of God in his time of suffering, and Job remained righteous, even while wondering if he had been abandoned by God, we can wonder about God's presence in the midst of the messiness of our lives and still remain faithful to God. We can wonder about how a loving God can allow innocent others to suffer, why God would let children go hungry, like the multitudes of children who are starving in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, and why God would allow good people like Lorraine and Bette and their families to suffer loss upon loss upon loss.

And so we wonder, but we know that while we wonder, though at times we may feel abandoned and alone, we are not alone. God is with us. God suffers with us. God grieves with us. Our self-limiting but just God hates injustice with us. So let us continue to seek God's face and to do God's work, and let us continue to bless God with our good words and good works, not because through these we can somehow manipulate God -- we cannot -- but simply because they are right and good and the doing them is the best way to be on long and winding journey of life. Amen.