

God's Greatness- Our Response Job 38: 1-7, 34-41; Mark 10: 35-45

When putting a worship service together, it is often an interesting challenge to find the common thread between the Lectionary's proposed scriptures- sometimes it may feel like a bit of a stretch. For this week, it seems important to be clear about that thread, as I found it. Rather than the lector reading Psalm 104 this morning, it was possible to use both the Video Interlude and the Call to Worship to focus on that Psalm's "beyond belief" of God's greatness- especially in creation. As we focus on our scripture from the Book of Job, we find much of the same in poetic verses- both of creation as well as the greatness of God's interaction with people. Then it is appropriate that as we stand in awe of God's greatness, we also move in the direction of what our response should be. This is where our scripture from Gospel of Mark ties in- our response being that of discipleship and service to others.

We often hear about the service world or service industry today. There has been much more growth in opportunities for employment in serving/caring for others than in the manufacturing of goods for people. Yet- even during the Pandemic- there are many unmet needs in the service area and for a variety of reasons. Often the "service" jobs lack the spirit of service- they are simply jobs- a paycheck, not much opportunity for the future. Another view/potential reason came in a Facebook post from a grandson this week. The post asked, "ever notice it's only the places paying near minimum wage that complain about not being able to find workers?" Currently, service groups, on various issues, are being organized. It also seems to be a good discussion for a church seeking to respond as Christ wants.

In the review and study for this message, I wandered through the Book of Job and found joy in the poetic nature of the chapters- a viewpoint that can happen when reading more than just a few selected verses. There are parts of it that speak eloquently about the greatness of God's work. I believe we could simply read chapter after chapter as a Sunday morning message. Looking for something to read this week? Give the Book of Job a try! Last week, Stan lifted up messages from the Book of Job and it is part of the lectionary readings again today. As you remember the story of Job- a man, close to God- blameless and upright, a very successful person. He had great wealth, large family, followed all the sacrifices and practices God required. Scripture tells us in the first chapter that heavenly beings, including Satan, came and challenged God. They were aware of Job's life of serving his God and the wealth he had received because of it. The heavenly beings and Satan were certain that if all of the blessings Job had received were taken away, he would no longer serve his God. God agreed to put Job under their control with one requirement- that Job not die as a result. Overnight Job begins to lose everything, his family, his possessions, his wealth, his health- everything but his life. The Book goes on through many chapters to relate conversations with three friends, all of whom

wondered repeatedly what Job had done wrong and gave advice as to how he could recover. Even Job's wife unsuccessfully encouraged Job to curse God. Job bitterly complains but yet remains strong in allegiance to God in spite of their arguments.

Then we come to today's Chapter 38, we find the conversation between God and Job. God's words feel harsh- "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" In other words, who are you and who are your friends to present these arguments without having clear understanding? God also asks, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding." In the entire chapter 38 and that of 39, God continues to clearly ask similar questions showing the greatness necessary to put creation into motion and enabling all creatures to live. In that way God not only points out the limits of human understanding as compared with the fullness of divine knowledge, but does so in a rather sarcastic manner- "Tell me, IF you have understanding.....-SURELY you know!" God continues- even though Job tries to walk away from the debate. Chapter 40 begins- "And the Lord said to Job: "Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty?" Anyone who argues with God must respond." Job attempts to give up, but God is not through. In the final chapter 42, Job finally is humbled and answers, "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted." Job admits he said things he did not understand and repents in dust and ashes.

Frederick Buechner has pointed out -maybe the reason God doesn't explain to Job why terrible things happen is that God knows an explanation would likely not change any part of Job's life- he would still be without family, poor and sick. Following that logic, we see the display of divine power is not to browbeat Job into submission. The point is to reveal the power that is at work for human benefit even in the harshness of a sometimes cruel world. I could not help but think such may be true the many times we question the reason for our own struggles- knowing the reason likely would not change the situations, but could/should draw us closer to a reliance on the greatness of God's strength.

We turn to the Scripture reading from Mark as we focus on our response to God's greatness. True discipleship is what this Gospel lesson is all about and it follows in Mark's gospel right after Jesus has attempted for the third time to tell the group of disciples about his upcoming death and resurrection. Do the disciples have what it takes to follow their Lord? Mark gives us a clear impression that they do not! Two of the disciples, brothers James and John- always coupled together in scripture- came to Jesus stating, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." An interesting statement- more of a demand that seems to hope or assume that Jesus will agree to whatever it is they want. Jesus does not give them a yes or no answer, simply asked what it is they want him to do. Their request- "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." Their request indicates they expect Jesus to claim his power soon, to overthrow the Romans, and to take command. They still have no

idea of the kind of Messiah their master is and are only concerned with their own power and glory. A side note I found interesting- The Gospel of Matthew records this same request using almost identical words- BUT it is being asked by the mother of James and John! The Gospel of Luke seems not to record it at all, except for possibly a discussion about who would be the greatest in Christ's kingdom. Jesus answered James and John by asking them if they would be able to drink the cup that he drank, to which they readily agreed they could do- of course, not really understanding what was involved. I came across a poem, written by Andrew Daughters, that I think expresses it well: Quote:

James and John were fishermen, the sons of Zebedee. They left their nets and followed from the shores of Galilee.

One day they took the Lord aside and asked of him a boon. Their wish was understandable, but hardly opportune.

They wanted him to promise that when he to glory came, he'd seat them close on either hand, that they might share the same.

How little did they realize just what it was to ask, His glory was no easy road, but life-consuming task.

To be immersed, as Jesus was, in earthly stress and pain and drain his cup of bitter gall, rejection and disdain.

Had they but known, I really doubt that they'd have felt it loss to be denied to share with him whose glory was a cross! -end of quote-

Jesus ended the discussion with James and John by responding that designation of who would sit at his right or left hand was not his to give. It was about this time that the other ten disciples heard of James and John's request and predictably were immediately angry. Jesus moves quickly to nip this potential power struggle in the bud. Jesus reminds them and he has said before, "...whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Psalm 104 perceives God's greatness, "O LORD my God, you are very great." Why? Because God created the universe to serve as a place where God might dwell. The very forces of nature such as the wind are God's messengers. God covered the globe with waters and at God's voice the waters made way for land.

True greatness, what God recognizes as greatness, is not power lorded over others but power exercised for the purpose of serving others. God's greatness also lies not only in the cosmic

power found so beautifully stated in the poetry of Job, but in the use of that power to serve creation. God's example does not want to dominate creation, but to be in relationship with it. Very humanly, Job wanted God to weigh-in to his arguments with his friends and prove to them that he, Job, was right and they were wrong. In the midst of the whirlwind, Job is reminded of the great power of God and if Job was truly in a personal relationship with God, why was he so bothered by what his friends thought?

God's greatness is not about using power to bend others to our will. It is about bending our wills to use our power to meet the needs of others. We don't become a "great church" forcing others into our mold. We only become great by becoming servants to their needs. There is nothing basically wrong with greatness, so long as we understand what TRUE greatness is. Jesus is clear about that when he deals with the ten angry disciples- he states, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you...."

To be a servant, to be least, to live for the sake of others....THIS is our calling. Can we obey without suffering? Absolutely not? Here, then, is the point: Most people- not all, but most—really do want to be "good people." We don't want to be selfish. We want to be generous, kind, tolerant people who care about others and are always willing to lend a hand. We want to be this way, but then we discover the struggle that is usually necessary. Are we willing to continue? If it were easy, almost everyone would do it.

Being human, it is natural to want to be great- maybe even get in the history books as "So-and So the Great" or "that great Presbyterian Church in Canby." History remembering us, but will that get us into the Kingdom of God? History books or the kingdom of God- where would we rather be? Amen

Karen Houtman 10/17/2021