

Sermon Notes from CMJ
19th Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

RCL Readings – Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Psalm 26; Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16

ACNA Readings – Genesis 2:18-24; Psalm 8; Hebrews 2:1-18; Mark 10:2-16

Introduction. The problem of suffering and evil is not an issue only for the apologists and academics. We do not have to look far to see that there is much misery in the world. The issue affects us all, for we all encounter suffering and evil in some form sooner or later. The Bible does not ignore the issue of suffering nor the problem of evil. It tackles it head-on and offers hope where the secular world cannot.

Common Theme. Why do bad things happen to good people? When good people suffer, we all struggle to understand. How can the Almighty, who is by nature truly good, allow suffering in his creation? Does suffering have a purpose? These are some of the questions our readings grapple with.

Job 1:1, 2:1-10. Job is an interesting book in the Hebrew Bible, coming under the collection known as wisdom literature and placed amongst the Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. The author is unknown, and the main character is an enigma. Job's name in Hebrew is 'Ejov', which literally means enemy. He does not live in Israel; the opening sentence informs us he resides in the land of Uz, located somewhere beyond the Euphrates. Uz was not a Hebrew as he was a grandson of Shem by Aram and not by Eber (Gen 10:21-24ff).

Job somehow knows about God and the sacrificial system, as Job makes offerings for the sins of his children (Job 1:5), thus he appears to act as his own priest. Perhaps Job's ancestors learnt this behaviour from Uz, who learnt it from his great-grandfather Noah (Gen 8:20). However, the book itself never seeks to explain any of the mysteries of who Job is, how he knows the Lord and why God calls him 'his servant'. The book of Job is a story of godly suffering and perseverance as Job struggles to understand his suffering. Job contains the single longest monologue spoken by God, which is four chapters long (Job 38-41) and in which God never explains to Job the actual reasons for his suffering.

In chapter 2 we are introduced to a heavenly court scene in which the angels present themselves before the Lord. The angels (some translations use the term 'heavenly beings') are called 'sons of God' in Hebrew. The term 'son of God' is a Hebraic term that implies a relationship with God. Israel is called a son of God; the angels are called sons of God; you and I are called sons of God, for we all have a relationship with the Lord. Jesus is called the Son of God because he has a very special and unique relationship with the Father. The term 'Son of God' never denotes a biological relationship. The heavenly interaction recorded in chapter 2 is unknown to Job, only to the reader. Yet it is the heavenly interaction that leads to the suffering of Job. Verse 10 reflects on the pivotal theme for the book: 'Shall we receive the good from God, and shall we not receive the evil?' Job receives evil but not because he had done something wrong. Suffering is not a punishment for sin. That is not to say that there are no consequences for actions. We reap what we sow. Conversely, the Bible also shows many righteous people suffer at the hands of evil (e.g., the prophets, the Maccabean martyrs, and the Messiah himself),

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and they did not necessarily deserve it. Suffering may be part of some trial, as in the case of Job following the discussion between God and Satan. Suffering may be a discipline from the Lord that ends in a spiritual benefit, for we know from Paul that suffering produces perseverance, character and hope (Rom 5:3-5). Or suffering may be the consequence of some action that may or may not result from our hand. Like Job, we may never know the reason for our suffering, but like Job, we too can endure and hope in the risen Lord, as Job himself says, ‘I know that my Redeemer lives’ (Job 19:25).

Psalm 26. Psalm 26 is a prayer for vindication by David, although there is no internal indication as to which event in his life he seeks to be delivered from. Verse 1 reflects the same situation as Job. David is in some kind of trouble and seeks exoneration from the Lord, declaring himself to be blameless. That is not to say that David thinks of himself without sin, rather that the suffering he is enduring is not a punishment for some specific sin. So sure is David that the trials he is experiencing are not of his own doing that he asks the Lord to examine him for faults. Do we have the courage to ask God to examine us? David declares that he does not associate with evil people or wrongdoers. He is smart enough to choose his company well. Instead, the king delights to be with the Lord. We read in Samuel and Chronicles how David spent much time in the presence of God before the ark in Jerusalem. In Psalm 26:8, David says how much he loves to be in the Lord’s house, which at this point in time was simply a tent of David’s fashioning (2 Sam 6:17). David spent a great deal of time in God’s presence, yet still found himself suffering (an argument against a prosperity gospel that would promise no troubles for the followers of God). Despite the difficult situation of some magnitude that warranted this psalm, David reminds himself and us of God’s unfailing love and faithfulness. David prays for deliverance, so we can conclude that at the time of composing the psalm he had not received relief from his trial. Yet amidst the suffering, David confidently says he will stand in the congregation and praise the Lord. Similar to Job who refuses to curse God and die, David will likewise stand and bless the Lord. A man indeed after God’s own heart.

Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12. The author of Hebrews, whose identity remains in debate, was deeply rooted in Scripture, particularly making use of quotations from the book of Psalms. Many of the quotes from the Psalms initially appear to be taken out of context, however, this demonstrates the interpretive flexibility that existed in first-century Jewish thought. For the author of Hebrews, the Psalms all point to the Messiah, and the only way to truly understand the Psalms is through the Messiah. Hebrews has a high level of Christology, with Jesus being described as superior in all things. At the beginning of the epistle, Jesus is described as the ‘appointed heir of all things’ and ‘superior to the angels’. Then in chapter 2 Jesus is described in his humanity as ‘made lower than the angels’ only to reclaim his honour and glory through suffering. His suffering had a reason and a purpose. Hebrews declares, ‘It was fitting that God... should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered’. Death is defeated through suffering; Jesus is exalted through suffering; and dare I say, meaning itself is given to the world through suffering. If there is anything to learn it is that suffering, as horrible as it is, as difficult and unbearable as it is, is not meaningless.

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Mark 10:2-16. On the way to Jerusalem, the crowds gather again around Jesus, and as was his custom, he taught them. The Pharisees engage Jesus on the issue of divorce, which was a hot topic at the time. There were two principal views on the subject: one school followed the teachings of Hillel and the other, less popular school, followed the stricter teachings of Shammai. The Torah gave instructions for a legal divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1. Moses wrote that divorce can be granted should the man find something ‘unclean or indecent’ in his wife. A rabbinic debate ensued over the nature, meaning and constitution of ‘uncleanliness’. Mark records the questions asked of Jesus as, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’ The parallel account in Matthew 19:3 sheds a bit more light on the question: Can a man divorce his wife for ‘any and every reason’? Mark’s question ‘is it lawful’ corresponds to the ‘for any reason’ in Matthew.

The school of Hillel took a more liberal exegesis of Deuteronomy and permitted divorce on almost any grounds, including something as simple as poor cooking, whereas the stricter school of Shammai permitted divorce only in matters of unfaithfulness in the marriage bed. Please note that Moses does not command divorce, he permits divorce. There is a difference. Divorce is not the ‘unforgivable sin’, but it is far from the ideal and not the original plan of creation. Jesus quotes Genesis, siding with the school of Shammai in this case, to highlight the ideal example of marriage. The original purpose for the creation of male and female was for us to be together and not separated. All relationships can get very complicated, marriage no less so. Matthew includes the permission for divorce in the case of adultery, and Paul adds the possibility of abandonment in 1 Corinthians 7:15. This does not detract from the ideal of marriage and divorce presented by Jesus. The ideal of Jesus is the correct one. Marriage is a sacramental act made with vows before the Holy God, and we should not condemn but grieve at the state of fallen human affairs today.

The Gospel passage then ends with Jesus teaching that the kingdom of heaven is received with childlike faith. Childlike does not mean the same thing as childish. The disciples found the children to be annoying, but Jesus saw them just as important as adults. (That does not make them adults; they are still children.) How do you receive the kingdom of God like a child? The text does not elaborate, but generally speaking, children are teachable, they ask lots of questions, and they see the world with a little more innocence than we adults do. It is a generalization, of course, but children have a less complicated acceptance of the kingdom of heaven. I would also suggest that children’s understanding of divorce is a lot less complicated.

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ACNA Readings

Genesis 2:18-24. Genesis is the only ancient source that describes the creation of woman. No other ancient source or ancient tradition accounts for how females came to be. Interestingly, the Genesis narrative uses one verse to describe the creation of Man and six verses to describe the creation of Woman. Obviously, she is quite important. Genesis 2:18 is the first time in the Bible that God looked and saw something that was not good. Previously everything that had come into being had been good, but then something was not good. What was it? Being alone! Loneliness is not usually a good feeling for people, and community has a positive effect on the psyche. (Adding some modern psychology to this thought, statistically, the majority of sociopaths are single.) We note that God calls a people to himself, not a collection of individuals. Paul reminds us to never give up the habit of meeting together. Community is good for us. So in Genesis, what sort of Woman does God make for Man? The English translations usually say God makes a ‘helper’. The Hebrew is a little more interesting and nuanced. The text says God will make עֹזֵר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ (*ezer k’negdo*), which is *a helper that is opposite to him*. The word נֶגֶד (*neged*) means *opposite or against*. This implies that the Woman will be helpful but not a submissive doormat. Being helpful does not mean doing everything the other person always says. Sometimes the best help the Woman can be is to tell the Man, ‘You know what, that really is a dumb idea, and you might want to try it this way’. Our partner's helpful opposition can be of great benefit to the marriage and save many couples from disaster.

Psalm 8. David composes a psalm of praise to the Creator of the Universe. God’s majesty and power is proclaimed by both the heavens and humans – in particular the smallest of humans, the infants. David begins the psalm using the Name of God יהוה *YHWH*, which is translated into English as *LORD* (using all capitals). Some commentaries call this the ‘covenantal name of God’. I disagree with that nomenclature. יהוה is his actual name, regardless of what covenant is being talked about, including the New Covenant. Today the Jewish people call God ‘*HaShem*,’ which means ‘the Name’ to denote that they refer to God’s private name which is so holy they will not dare pronounce it. When Moses asked God for God’s name in Exodus 3:13-14, God did not answer the question directly. He responded instead by calling himself a special aspect of his character, אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה (*eheyeh asher eheyeh*), which can be translated *I am what I am* or *I will be what I will be*. The word אֶהְיֶה (*eheyeh*) means ‘to be’, but in biblical Hebrew, it is not always clear as to which tense is specified. God’s name is rooted in the verb ‘to be’. God is saying to Moses that he is ‘being’ and that he causes all things to be. What seems to impress David is not only how wonderful and powerful God is, but that in all his majestic splendour, God is so mindful of mere mortals. David is amazed that the eternal God would give mankind glory and honour. God delights to leave heaven and come to earth to fellowship with Adam in the Garden in the cool of the evening. He delights to journey with his people in the wilderness towards Canaan. He delights to humble himself and take the form of man to redeem the world. He is present at the good times and through the bad, through trials and sufferings. In all of this, God still ‘is’.

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