Sermon on Proper 27 Year B 2021
(Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16)

You never can tell when it will happen, sometimes it will a line in a novel or something somebody says on a documentary as they recount how they made it through some event or period in life or maybe it’s something a loved one says to you at just the right moment; sometimes wisdom arrives on our doorstep and we’re ready for it, awake to it.

I had such a moment about 8 years ago at one of the sessions of our Diocesan School for Parish Development. One of the presenters was talking about conflict and he said “how you react to a person or situation tells you more about yourself than about the other person.”

Now I’d heard that sentiment before but now it struck me as true. I was ready to hear it in a new way because of what I was going through attempting to restart, with others, St. Matthew in the face of some pretty strong external and internal opposition.

I also understood that what was being said wasn’t just the obvious, well, you only understand yourself; you can’t see what’s going on in somebody else’s head.

No, it was something more profound; in the past when someone would have said an angry word to me and I would have offered one in return or become defensive and if you were to ask me in that moment, why did you react like that I might have said, “what do you mean, how did you expect me to react?” as if my reaction were something automatic.

Like all of us, I knew they weren’t, they were learned behaviour but now I realized that I had befriended them and hadn’t imagined there were other ways to act in situations of conflict.

The presenter was also saying that when someone gets angry or says something slanderous we can recognize at that moment that this isn’t about me, it’s about them. They’re making choices in the middle of circumstances that could be quite different. Even if I did provoke it!

The light bulbs went on for me; I realized that in my marriage and as a leader in the church, nothing was causing me to react in anger, or disappointment, or resignation.

Humorously, I recognized a kind of twisted empathy! It’s not helpful empathy to become angry if another is angry.

In difficult situations we need not helplessly mirror the behaviour of others; we have, the presenter finished by saying, substantial power to be peaceful and joyful. Easy? No; but a real possibility, especially with God’s help!

This wisdom about how we choose to act in the midst of difficulty is highlighted for us in our opening reading today, the searing case of Job’s suffering.

The book opens with a scene so bizarre and surreal that you’ll be glad to know ancient Jews and modern scholars, anyone except certain fundamentalists, take it as a literary conceit.

That is, however likely or unlikely that the figure of Job was an historical figure, the scene of God and Satan playing poker for Job’s family and acute physical suffering isn’t a thing.

Of course we know that just intuitively; God isn’t like that, thank God!

The author uses this conceit as a way of helping us understand that the root causes of suffering *can’t be* attributed to some celestial game of chicken. But sometimes we need to see the ridiculous before we’re ready for the real; that’s what satire does.

But of course, the reactions in the text, Job’s, Job’s wife and later “Job’s friends,” those are typical, they’re not conceits but the full breadth of human possibilities.

In our text today there’s a word *garad* that appears only once in the Hebrew Bible; translated into English it’s the word scrape, “Job took a potsherd [a piece of broken pottery] with which to scrape all the loathsome sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head.”

It’s a picture meant to elicit horror. I mean as Jew, it you had only one skin lesion, you were in danger of having to live outside as the village as a leper, imagine a man covered in such sores!

This image of Job scraping away at his sores can be taken in a metaphorical way as well; it’s as if Job, indeed all of us who ask why bad things happen to good people, are taking something ill-suited to the task, our finite questions, our broken pieces of pottery, and scraping away at all the conventional answers to suffering and evil.

In seminary I wrote a thesis that included a chapter on the book of Job. I was interested in it for several reasons, one of which was that I saw myself more in Job’s wife and Job’s friends then in Job, another that wanted to understand how such classic Jewish text might inform Christian theology and help us develop theology that doesn’t just give simple, cute answers to the gnarly questions of existence.

In all the dialogues of the book, Job’s friends try to assert that he’s actually at fault for the suffering he’s receiving but Job won’t have it; he’s not going to cave to some false understanding of karma or to put it into scientific terms: simple cause and effect

He wants to know the meaning of suffering in our lives; he wants to understand God’s justice and why this is happening to him when he’s spent his time enacting justice for his family and his neighbours.

We certainly don’t have time summarize all that goes on in this fascinating book indeed you can’t summarize it; it’s poetry and must be read; the experience of reading it is its content.

I can’t summarize the content but there are two arcs that characterize the book: one is that as finite creatures we don’t ever get the answers we feel like we’re entitled to.

I sometimes think it’s funny that people want to create anti-aging technologies that will allow human beings to live 200 years.

My question to such scientists is “do you know how much relational, physical, and emotional toil and suffering you can fit into 80 years?” And you want to make it possible for people to have to endure 2 and ½ times that. Length is not quality and quality of life is not dependant on length! Regardless of how long we live, the questions that don’t get answered will always be there!

So, we must come, this poetry claims, to live with strong elements of mystery and incompleteness.

How to do this is the second arc of the book. Near the end God says to Job’s friends, “You have not spoken of me what is right as my servant Job has.”

This is fascinating because it is Job’s friends who have offered sophisticated reasons, theological systems, in an attempt to make sense of what Job is going through.

Job hasn’t offered a reason but has asked questions, searing questions; he’s made accusations of God, he’s put God on trial, but here’s the thing; he’s done it because of faith and in faith.

This key verdict of God’s “You have not spoken of me rightly as has my servant Job could just as easily be translated “You have not spoken *to me* rightly as has my servant Job.”

There has been no evasion in Job; he’s never said one thing in order to be polite when he’s really meant another. He has simply and persistingly been honest with God.

His reaction to his circumstances says so much more about Job than it does about the one who has supposedly allowed this to happen, God

His reaction to his circumstances has been to stay engaged with God, to pray, to struggle, and to finally accept what he cannot change (the good and bad of life) without ever giving up on the cause of justice

He is, in this, contrasted with his wife who simply counsels: “curse God and die.” Her reaction says that she’s not yet serious about faith; not serious about wanting to wrestle with what will truly help her find peace; she just lives on the surface of things and quickly wants to run from trouble.

Her reaction is the typical “how did you expect me to react” complaint we all are tempted to give when trouble comes, but one that shuts us off from what we might learn; that doesn’t engage with those that have caused you trouble hoping that, somehow, magically, they’ll go away and we won’t have to change. it is a complaint *about* God instead of a complaint *to* God.

It is those who engage as Job does who recognize Jesus for who he truly is; God joining with us in our sufferings; God not ashamed of the finiteness of the struggles of human flesh but determined to join us in our tears, our questioning, even our scraping.

The good news of God is that God does not simply mirror *our* typical reaction to God but patiently invites and then, astoundingly and radically, joins us. God fully understands that our reaction to Life says more about us than about God.

God recognizing that as finite beings we will never be fully satisfied with answers but only with a brother, a divine brother, walking with us, a presence in the midst of whatever is now.

God recognizes that we will never be fully at peace unless we become partners in the divine life. In our gospel text we see this partnership worked out in terms of loving justice for all women, the upshot of his teaching on divorce.

We see it in the call to work together for the sake of all children (all children matter).

And on this Sunday, the eve of St. Francis Day, working together for the sake of all creatures and creation itself.

God wants to help each of us and this parish by encouraging us to scrape off conventional answers in favour of genuine choices in the face of difficult circumstances. We do so with Christ, through Christ and in Christ. Amen.