Beyond Belief

Texts on Sunday, February 19, 2012

Job 2: 1-10; Mark 9: 2-9

Some Christians believe that after death, they, like all who die, will be subject to the judgment of God. Some do not. Some Christians believe that by suffering a cruel punishment which ought to be visited on all humans for their sins, Jesus saves Christians from hell. Some do not believe the crucifixion works like that at all. Some Christians believe that priests have special powers to perform rituals that save people. Some do not. Now, we could continue a litany like this for hours, but let's skip to the end. Many Christians believe that those who don't believe as they believe are going to get in trouble with God. Other Christians care not a whit what others believe, so long as they can go on believing what they believe. I do not recommend either of these positions. For those drawn to the name of Christ Jesus, I recommend the book of Job to help us feel the depth of our calling.

Job is headed beyond belief. Now, he doesn't know it yet in Chapter 2, but the poet who put him there does. As we said last week, *Job* is not about Job. Job's author lived in evil times—perhaps in the 500s B.C., perhaps a century later—and he wrote this book about his people, who were sorely afflicted from crown to foot by poverty and hatred and oppression on every side. And back then, all the ancient traditions taught that good and evil, reward and punishment, came from one divine hand.

The gifted poet of Job saw how belief *about* God was turning both religion and people into empty shells. Many of his people cursed Yahweh for letting go of them, and turned to other gods. Haven't you watched that walk? The poet of Job saw also that many who stayed in church merely sang the old songs and followed the formulas yet behaved like jackals. But the poet of Job had a mystic feeling for the reality of God, come what may. He had a sense for a divine unity which might heal his beloved community. With unsurpassed spiritual courage, he set *Job* down so that those whose heart is opened by this word might be sent beyond belief into life itself. Every generation needs the same help. Why, Jesus came to aim us toward this very goal—he called it the kingdom of God. He sought to pull you, to win you, out of the booth of belief into life itself.

Think about the booth of belief in the story of Jesus' transfiguration. "There appeared to [the disciples] Elijah with Moses . . . talking with Jesus." Well, how did they know who was who? Did they just *believe* it was Elijah and Moses? Or did they believe that the men on the mountain looked a lot

like the heroes in the color plates in their Sunday school Bibles? Absurd. An appearance story is not a belief. It refers to an experience. And the story that tells of a theophanic experience is not given just for you to believe it. Rather: to send you hungering for your own experience. Here is more warning on the subject: When in their spiritual confusion, the disciples want to build booths for the heroes, to capture their experience once and for all so they might return to the heights on holy days as priests of the shrine, God interrupts. From the cloud of unknowing comes yet another experience. No booths! No more claims that the sacred spot is here or there. No more beliefs. Of Jesus, God says not "*Believe* in him" but, beyond belief, "Listen to him!" Is your faith a listening faith, experiencing faith beyond belief?

Now Job, the figure in our story, was blameless and upright. If you wish to receive the gift God sends down through the ages, accept this story on its own terms. Do not import the assumption that "all have sinned," therefore Job *must* be in the wrong, for this poet is fueling a fire beneath all sorts of beliefs. Do you believe that God punishes those who do evil with evil and rewards the good with good things? Is God's blessing as plain to see as fragrant flowers are to smell? Are those with many people praying for them likely to get a better result than those with none? Is God a slot machine, disgorging only after many nickel prayers! Do you believe God plans it all out, somehow making Mrs. Tuner tarry over tea so she will not miss the mayhem meant to destroy her and her car today, just so Mrs. Smith, surviving same, might say on evening news 'Thank God. I know he has plans for me'? Plans! Do you believe it? In our story, Job believes it. He is a good religious man. He performs every duty, he believes all they taught him—even as all his property, all his servants, all his children, and his skin are laid waste for a wager in heaven. Is God responsible? Job believes it.

His wife, though, is done with religion. "Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God and die." Consider carefully with me the meaning of cursing God. First of all, swallow this nut. Every single time the word "curse" appears in Job—Job fears his children might do it, the satan is certain Job will, Job's wife wants him to—the word in the story is "bless." *Barak*. Now, Hebrew has a word for *curse*, but the poet of Job chooses to do what poets do: throw the old words of your beliefs in a mixer, to move you beyond belief into an experience. "Bless God and die," says Job's wife, who stands for all people who in the confusion of their griefs have been utterly emptied of any hope; who ridicule the old religion—Bless God!; who choose cynicism or bow now to bare reason as god. What is at stake in considering a curse?

When the great powers of the ancient world laid siege to the cities of Israel and Judah, great prophets spoke in one voice about the meaning of the calamities. Their words have often thrilled from this pulpit. The prophets

said that God hates the way we have worshiped. They said God hates the way we have profited from the poor and exploited our foreign workers. They said God will sorely punish us for our evil. It may be news to you that most of Deuteronomy, though set in the ancient mouth of Moses, was composed before and after Jerusalem was ruined. Like the prophets, the authors hoped to stir to life the spirits of a weary, fearful people. In Deuteronomy 28, Moses is made to warn of a disaster that had already happened. He says:

> Your sons and daughters shall be given to another people; you will strain your eyes looking for them all day but be powerless to do anything. A people whom you do not know shall eat up the fruit of your ground and of all your labors; you shall be continually abused and crushed, and driven mad by the sight that your eyes shall see. The LORD will strike you . . . with grievous boils of which you cannot be healed, from the sole of your foot to the crown of your head.

This is not literally Moses. This is their story. Long ago, it was a new narrative, a way to make sense of what had happened; to connect the unbelievable sorrow of siege, destruction, and exile; a way for a people to know who they are—still the sheep of God's pasture, even in the valley of the shadow of death. And if God was with them all along, though chastening them, then could they not dwell in the house of the LORD forever?

Perhaps. But such unity with God has a high cost. For if God is always good, and if our trials mean that God is still working out divine justice upon us, then ought we not believe there would come some proportion between the evils done to us and the evils we have done? After decades of this, the pressure is on. How long, O Lord? 2,500 years ago, the modern mind began to wake, for some chose to disconnect from God altogether: to blame him and hate him; or to abandon him and try another; or to decide there is no God at all. The heart of the temptation to curse God is to abandon hope that the world is coherent; to drop back down into power politics, where only might makes right and winning is done by intimidation and there is no justice, and everyone does what is right in their own eyes. That is what it is to curse God and die. Many people in every great religion, every great church, every great nation finally curse God in this sense. They abandon unity and community and take matters into their own hands. They do so with the formulas of religion still on their lips—which may give the sense for the poet's use of the word *bless*. It forces you to wonder if they mean *curse* or *bless*. In other words, they know not what they do. Have you cursed people in the church? Or have you blessed them? Can you feel the difference?

Yet is Job right to hold fast to his integrity? Is he right to bless God continually amidst sorrows, believing all of them deserved? Religion says so, he thinks. "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" But is this not a kind of curse, to strive so hard to hold to the right belief, to keep God in the right after God has let the satan strike him with

"grievous boils of which you cannot be healed, from the sole of your foot to the crown of your head?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips, writes the poet. Is there another kind of sin? A canyon of doubt yawns beyond belief.

Let us tarry with this feature of the story, that Job's skin is made loathsome. He is not afflicted with inside disease; he is not terminally ill. Rather, he cannot show his face—his person—without suffering the disgust of all. This is the worst disease. We say it again: *Job* is not about Job. It is about a people—but not just one people in a time past. Rather, *Job* is for every people in every time who have been afflicted in their skin by hatred, and pinioned there by religion's ordinary beliefs. Job is for any people who, (with Deuteronomy) have been "continually abused and crushed, and driven mad by the sight their eyes must see." Job is for people whose old religion has crashed into the unanswered enigma of their suffering, and who have survived the crash and stood with face fresh before a scornful world, ready for a true God—but not another God; ready rather for God beyond belief.

Thinking about these things yesterday, though ot has been more than twenty years since I read Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, I had to go hunting for Baby Suggs' sermon in the Clearing to all the newly freed slaves. As she preaches this word in the Clearing, the civil war has covered the whole nation of America in a loathsome sore from head to foot:

> "Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people, they do not love your hands. They only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, tap them together, stroke them on your face, 'cause they don't love [your face] either. And no, they ain't in love with your mouth. What you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear. What you put into it to nourish your body they will snatch away. This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved . . . And O my people, out yonder, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck. And all your inside parts that they just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. And the beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize." Saying no more, she stood up then and danced with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say.

Friends, Job is headed for the heart. But it's a long road there, through many skins and faces—a road many of you know in a way I never will. It is a way in the flesh, bold in the body, a way way out beyond belief into life itself, where God lives now and forever. Thy kingdom come, on earth.

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