

Christ Church Cranbrook

Sermon for Earth Sunday, November 18, 2012

Job 28:1-18, Psalm 104:1-8, 25, I Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19, Matthew 25:31-46

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As we approach the climax of the liturgical calendar each year, our readings, our prayers, and our hymns draw us to the bountiful providence of God and the promise that God's entire creation is moving toward a day of completion in which Christ's reign over all things will be fully established and fully acknowledged. Here, in the meantime, we are called to be mindful that God created all things, that all things belong to God, and that we are accountable for how we live out our unique vocation to be faithful stewards of all that has been entrusted to us.

I recall the story of a Texas rancher and his pastor. One Sunday, the pastor preached on this theme of God's ownership and our stewardship. His text was from the 24th Psalm; "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and all who dwell therein" (Psalm 24:1 BCP). After the morning service, the pastor was invited out to the ranch house to have Sunday dinner with the rancher and his family. When they had finished their meal, the rancher told the pastor that he wanted to show him something. They climbed into the rancher's pickup truck and drove out to the highest point on the ranch. The rancher turned off the engine and they stepped out. He said to the pastor, "Look around you. As far as the eye can see, the land belongs to me. I earned the money to buy this land. I put a fence around it. All those cattle you see down there are mine too. I make sure they are fed and taken care of. Now, pastor, in light of what I have just shown you and told you, do you still contend that the earth is the Lord's?" The pastor thought for a minute, looked around at the landscape and livestock, and finally said to the rancher, "You may have a point. Let's agree to meet here a hundred years from now and talk more about it."

The face-to-whirlwind encounter we read about in today's lesson from the Hebrew scriptures might just be such a conversation; one in which God personally takes on the likes of that rancher and puts him in his place, bringing the proper balance back into the Creator/creature relationship. Except this conversation is not between God and an arrogant self-made rancher, but between God and poor long-suffering Job. Couldn't God have gone a little easier on Job?

Well, Job did, after all, invite God to have this conversation. Throughout the book, Job has been setting the scene for this confrontation. In the thirteenth chapter, Job said, "I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to argue my case with God" (Job 13:3). Job said, "Call, and I will answer; or let me speak, and you reply to me" (Job 3:22). So when God arrives in the whirlwind and begins the interrogation of Job, Job is only getting what he asked for.

Still, I suppose God could have gone a little easier on the poor man. But maybe the point isn't just that God is in charge of things. Maybe Job has misunderstood God. Job and his friends have a theology that says God won't allow bad things to happen if you behave yourself, that God will stand in the path of hurricanes and floods and earthquakes that threaten godly people, but will bring the forces of nature to bear on the dwellings of terrorists and corrupt public officials. Job is in a serious situation and as he stands there trying to get God's attention, suddenly and dramatically, God answers Job and reminds him of his very own words:

Where then does wisdom come from?
And where is the place of understanding?

Mortals do not know the way to it,
and it is not found in the land of the living.
The deep says, "It is not in me,"
and the sea says, "It is not with me." . . .
God understands the way to wisdom,
and God knows its place. . .
And God said to humankind,
"Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom. . ." (Job 28:20, 23, 28)

The term "fear of the Lord" does not mean to be scared of God. It means to experience the awe that comes from recognition of the greatness, the generosity, and the majesty of the Creator of the Universe. Wisdom begins as we worship God, not when we try to hide from God or demand that God meet us on our own terms. Our sympathy for Job can make God's questions sound very harsh. However, these questions are an appeal for Job to remember what Job has already said. Job should remember that God's ways are not the same as our ways. The way to truth and wisdom is not an exercise in mathematics that always leads to logical conclusions. Such wisdom does not lead to righteousness alone. Job had righteousness, as did the rich young man who came to Jesus seeking eternal life and so many others. Such righteousness is the problem. This kind of righteousness is the kind for which we want to take credit and use as currency to get good things from God.

When we are too proud of the righteousness that is of our own doing, or if we dread appearing before God without enough righteousness, we miss the point. And God asks us, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Who determined its measurements—surely you know!" In such an encounter, our awesome Creator is reminding us that the earth and everything in it truly is both God's handiwork and God's possession, entrusted to us, for our use and enjoyment, and entirely and eternally free of charge. What God asks in return is that we care for the earth and its creatures, especially one another, as an expression of gratitude in response to what Love Divine has already done and will continue to do eternally.

In today's Gospel, Jesus doesn't appear in a whirlwind, but speaks of the same sort of courtroom scene that God had with Job. It's the time of reckoning that our collect for the day calls "the account we must one day give," the Final Judgment. Jesus separates the righteous from the unjust as a shepherd might separate sheep from goats. In this parable, both the sheep and the goats are surprised. Why? Because they both misunderstood. They both had faulty, Job-like theology. The equation didn't seem to add up. "Lord, when did we see you hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, or in prison?" both asked.

His response to both is so like God's interrogation of Job. He says, in effect, "My grace is not given as a response to your calculation or to anything else. My grace is given out of the same love that laid the foundation of the universe and sustains your life and everything in it. If you love me for that, let love be your response. Live out your destiny as the crowning glory of my creation by being faithful stewards of my good gifts. I will continue to provide for you, as I always have, not because of you are good, but because I am good. And, remember, however you treat what I have made, especially others whom I have created in my own image, is how you treat me."