

WHERE WERE YOU

Sermon preached by Rev. Edee Fenimore

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Texts: Job 38:1, 4-7 and Mark 10: 35-45

Twenty five or more years ago, before I entered seminary, I remember the pastor of the church that I attended in Wilmington, Delaware saying that the questions that arise from a bible passage are often more important than the answers. Well, that pastor, Tom Murphy, is now retired, living on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. But I can well imagine him peering over his wire rimmed glasses and saying that, judging from the number of questions, our two lessons for today are extremely important. The questions are many and interesting and they are right there. The reader or hearer does not even have to formulate them. These questions are put in the mouth of God by the teller of the story of Job, and in the mouth of Jesus by the recorder of the incident in Mark 10. And these questions like all questions allow us to wrestle with ideas, allow us to continue thinking about the concepts that the question addresses. Statements or conclusions often do just the opposite. They end or conclude the wrestling, the thinking, the ruminating.

Most of the 38th chapter of Job is simply one question after another. Some, but only some, of those questions were included in the First Reading. Perhaps you remember the story of Job. After a series of calamities has befallen Job, after his so called friends have told him that he must have done something wrong, after he has been stripped of nearly everything that was important to him, Job hears God speaking to him out of the whirlwind. But before asking this impressive series of questions, God tells Job what is about to happen. God says, "I will question you, and you shall declare to me." Then they begin; one question after another; "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" That is followed by an almost mocking statement, "Tell me if you have understanding." Then there is another question and an equally pointed statement; "Who determined the measurements of the earth - surely you know." Then for the next 35 verses of Chapter 38 and on into Chapters, 39, 40 and 41, God hurls question after question. Listen to just a sampling. "Who shut in the sea with doors when it burst from the womb? Have the gates of death been revealed to you or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? Has the rain a father? Who has begotten the drops of dew? From whose womb did the ice come forth and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of heaven? Do you loose the cords of Orion? Can you guide the bear with its children? This is just a small sampling of the questions that God poses to Job.

As a story teller I must point out how many of the phrases that are in these questions refer to images found in ancient tales of how the world came into being. The sea bursting from the womb, the father of rain, giving birth to the hoarfrost of heaven and of course the references to Orion and the bear and her children all come from tales that preceded the story of Job by many hundreds of years. The original hearers of this story influenced by

these even more ancient tales, undoubtedly believed in a myriad of gods, each of whom had a different function with regard to aspects of the natural world. The questions that are put in the mouth of God in this story would invite a new way of seeing the world. These questions cause the reader or hearer to consider that there is one divine being who brought this world into being. Instead of a god in the trees, one in the sea, one in the animals of the forest, one in the animals of the fields and one in the birds of the air, there is a single divine being who brought the entire world into being. And this one God, called Yahweh by the wandering tribes of Israel and Judah has a relationship with human beings. This creator of the world and all the beings in it loves the creation.

And that is the second point indicated by all these questions. God is in conversation with Job. When God says, “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth”. God is not only proclaiming that God is the Creator but is also saying “I want to be in conversation with you. I want to be in relationship with you”. And by saying this to Job, God is saying it to all humanity. Perhaps if we put the emphasis on a different word in the opening question we will hear the continuing plea of God. “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” “Where were you, where are you where will you be” is God’s constant question to us. God is always wanting Job and you and me to be with God in creating this world as the place of God’s reign.

That brings us to the Second Lesson, the passage from the 10th Chapter of Mark. It is the story of James and John, the sons of Zebedee and their request to be the honored ones in God’s kingdom. Their words to Jesus are pretty brazen. They say, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” They have already tipped their hands as to who they believe is in charge, but Jesus gives them another shot at understanding what God’s reign would be like.

Jesus says to them, “‘What is it you want me to do for you?’ and they said to him, ‘Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.’” This is a pretty familiar story, not merely because it is recorded in Matthew and Luke as well as Mark, but because it is a common human pattern of behavior. We all want to be part of a community that is doing something significant but often our not so secret desire is that we will be in charge, be the most important, be the one who garners the admiration and applause. Oh, we might not be so open as James and John but we are right there with them.

And when Jesus responds to James and John, he is responding to all of us who seek to follow him. As God did in the story of Job, Jesus responds with a question. “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with”. With the language of metaphor and imagery Jesus is asking if they really want to follow him through all that is to come. The same bravado that led them to ask for positions of power and prestige in the first place causes them to say, “We are able”. But of course we who know the rest of the story know that all that bravery disappears when the authorities try and put Jesus to death. All of the followers betray, deny or scatter their behavior showing that in fact they cannot follow Jesus. Notice that Jesus does not turn them away or mock them or say they are not worthy to be called his followers. He asks them the

probing question and then he begins to teach them that to be active in God's realm, to be followers of Jesus, people must be willing to serve. In the words of Jesus, "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant."

So we come back to the questions... for us all. Are we willing to be servants in God's realm? The more than forty folk who have decided to become a part of this particular faith community and whom we will recognize in just a few minutes struggled with the answers to that question a week ago. They came up with many ways that they could serve this community and the world of God's beloved children. As we all walk with them on the continuing journey of faith, let us respond again to the call to be servants in the realm of God. Where were you? Where are you? Where will you be?