

"Knowing Our Place—Experiencing God's Peace"
Sermon for the Twenty-first Sunday of Kingdomtide
Lectionary Year B
October 25, 2009
Text: Job 42:1-6, 10-17
Dr. David T. Howeth

Let me ask you a question. How many of you would like your lives to be filled with joy? Let me see a show of hands. Just as I thought. Everyone wants to be joyful. Even the curmudgeons among us are attracted to the idea of experiencing a life of joy. I've got good news for you this morning. I'm going to tell you how to have that. This sermon is designed to explain to you exactly what you need to do to be filled with joy in your life. Do I have your attention now?

Joy begins with being at peace. One of the prayers that I include in every graveside service I perform asks God to "comfort us in our loneliness, strengthen us in our weakness, and give us courage to face the future unafraid." The prayer goes on to request that the Lord "draw those of us who remain in this life closer to one another, make us faithful to serve one another, and give us to know the peace and joy which is eternal life." As one scholar states at the conclusion of his commentary on our lectionary passage from Job for this morning, "God's ways are mysterious and past our understanding, but one thing is not in dispute: the God of Israel, the Father of Jesus Christ, is a God

of compassion whose ultimate will for all persons is peace and joy" [Brueggemann et al, p. 559].

Those of you who attended my presentation at our Lenten Luncheons earlier in the year may recall that in talking about the first two essential aspects of Christian love, joy and peace, I suggested that the joy we experience has its source in the peace made between us and God . . ." So we sing in the appropriate order, "I've got peace like a river," and that leads to the "joy like a fountain in my soul." In other words, *we discover joy when we find peace.* And the biblical understanding of peace is much more than simply the absence of strife, it refers to wellbeing or wholeness. It is an inner quiet that has the power to overcome anxiety and can keep us from feeling fretful. It's no wonder, then, that such peace leads to joy.

The story of Job is one in which we see how a person obtains peace so as to experience a life of joy. Let me remind you of the basic plot of the narrative. It begins with God bragging about Job's faith, how "there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil." Quite frankly, it is enough to make you gag. Who really is like that, and who really wants to be around a person who is like that? Job: the model child among all God's children.

Satan, who seems to be performing the task of the head of the Quality Control Department of Faith-In-God, Inc., suggests the possibility that the only reason Job is so wonderful and his faith is so exemplary is because he has lived a charmed life as a direct result of God's favoritism. He's got a point there. It is rather easy to have faith when your life is easy. Satan proposes that if Job's life changed from charmed to cursed, his faith in God would change just as dramatically.

Satan then dares God to let the Accuser make Job's life miserable. "God, I dare you to quit protecting Job against anything bad happening to him. In fact, I double-dog dare you." God says in response, "Satan, you're on. My man Job is so faithful, he is the star quarterback on my Fantasy Faith Team. He will come through in the clutch. My money is on him." So God takes the dare, and Job's life goes immediately down the toilet.

Job suffers in every way possible. Job's ever-supportive wife tells him he should curse God, but Job can't do that. His friends say that he needs to repent of his sin, but Job can't do that either because he maintains his innocence. His so-called friends, you see, believe that bad things only happen to bad people. Instead, Job wants to put God on trial. For those of you who have read *The Shack*, this is where that idea comes from. Job wants God to be in the courtroom with God in

the witness box explaining why he has done to Job what he has done. Job wants his day in court, convinced that the court will find him innocent and God guilty.

There is the old saying that you should be careful what you wish for. Our passage of scripture for this morning comes from the last chapter in the book. It is how the story ends. Beginning four chapters back, Job gets his wish. But along with it, he gets his comeuppance. It seems that God is more interested in being the prosecutor than being the witness, so he has several questions for Job.

"Where were you when I created the universe, because I don't remember seeing you there when I made everything out of nothing? You don't seem to have much in the way of creative abilities. And what about your sustaining abilities? Can you make the sun come up in the morning? Can you control the weather? Can you control wild animals? Can you control anything? Were you the one who made horses to be so majestic and mighty or eagles to soar and catch their prey? Do you understand the reproductive cycle of every living thing? Or how about this one, Job: Can you catch Moby Dick with a cane pole, a hook, and a worm just to play with him around the house like a pet?"

I don't think you can do any of those things or any of the other things I can do, and here's the reason why: *I am God and you aren't.* It's just that simple. I am God, and you aren't, and no matter how many

questions you have for me, that's really the only answer that is appropriate and the only answer you are going to get from me today. Case closed.

Job winds up realizing that he cannot contest God's justice. In genuine humility, he acknowledges his finitude and the limits of his wisdom. Job stands in awe before God. As a result of his encounter with the Almighty, Job's perspective is changed. So what he confesses as wrong is not God's treatment of him but his attempt to know what only God can know [Craddock et al, p. 449]. Job says to God, in essence, "When I asked you to meet me in court, O God, I simply didn't know what I was talking about. But things are clearer to me now. I no longer wish to challenge you; I only wish to learn from your wisdom. I will be quiet while you answer my questions. . . . Therefore I yield" [Brueggemann et al, p. 558].

So Job accepts his place with respect to God. He realizes that things work better when we know our place before God, and we need to come to the same realization. But let's be clear about what that means. To know our place before God means to struggle at faith, even to the point of struggling with God. To know our place means to get angry with God, quarrel with God, and to challenge conventional wisdom about God. And to know our place is to acknowledge humbly God's power and wisdom, even if we cannot fully comprehend God's ways [Craddock et al,

p. 449]. We simply cannot know all the whys when it comes to God, and we are wrong to presume we can.

Quite frankly, I get rather annoyed with those people who seem to have a lock on God's will. They operate on the assumption that they know exactly the mind and heart of God. They know whom God approves of and whom God disapproves of. They know whom God loves and whom he doesn't. They know what God wants us to believe and what God judges as heretical. They know what God considers moral and what God considers immoral. They know what God ranks as of supreme importance and what God is less concerned about. They know what God considers just and what God considers unjust.

But the truth is, if those people, in their arrogance, were to have the same kind of one-on-one encounter with God that Job did, they might come to the same conclusion Job did, namely, that they don't know squat. *No one, absolutely no one, can presume to comprehend completely the mystery of God, his way and his will.* That's why our faith needs to be upheld with conviction, but at the same time, held with all possible humility before God and one another.

Do you remember the old ad for Coca-Cola that made the simple, definitive statement: "Things go better with Coke"? Things go better for us when we know our place before God. And what is that place? The current campaign that includes television commercials, billboard

signs, and ads in magazines gets it right: I AM SECOND. I am second, and that means that I am not first, because only God can be in that position.

We can have peace, real peace in our lives, the kind of peace that leads to abundant joy, more joy than we can imagine. But the only way we can have that peace and joy is to do what Job eventually did: he yielded to God. He surrendered to God. He quit trying to be god, and let God be God. He threw himself on the mercy of the court, God's court. He submitted himself to God in all humility. He admitted that he needed to be second because God needed to be first in his life.

It's exhausting trying to be our own gods. It will wear us out and wear us down if we stubbornly keep up the effort. There is a little magnet that is stuck to the side of our refrigerator over the place where I make my hot tea every morning. It reads, "Good morning. This is God. I will be handling all your problems today. I won't need your help! Have a nice day." I read that every morning. I admit that I don't always live like I believe that to be true. I tend to think God needs more of my help than I do of his. All of us have to work on realizing we are second and not first.

As a result of coming to know his place before God, Job experiences peace that leads to joy. He is at such peace and knows such joy that he is able to pray for those friends of his who were so

mean to him earlier in the story by insisting he had done something wrong or else God wouldn't be punishing him like he was. *When you get to the point of being able to pray for your enemies, it's a sure sign that you know God's place and are experiencing God's peace.*

And it's important to note that Job's peace and joy come before God restores his fortunes, giving him twice as much as he had before. This is no gospel of prosperity. All the business about the number of livestock Job wound up owning, along with just the right number of sons and the daughters who were all beauty queens, that's just icing on the cake. That's just God showing off or perhaps just his way of apologizing, and it's not what really matters in this story. What really matters is what I said I would give you in this sermon, the way to have a joy-filled life. Make God number one, first and foremost, of ultimate importance, and *no matter what happens to you, you will be at peace, and you will have joy.*