

Sermon for the Third Sunday after Pentecost  
Proper 7  
RCL Lectionary, Year B  
Job 38:1-11, 16-18; Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41  
June 21st, 2009

The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour  
Mill Valley, California

***Growing Up in Faith***  
by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

You have to love today's readings. The passage from Job is among my favorites in all of Judeo-Christian scripture. It's the climax of the primordial "Why Bad Things Happen to Good People," a wisdom story that goes right to the heart of those cutting but perennial questions about evil, good, suffering, and human humility in responding to all three -- existential questions that defy easy, pat answers and leave us uncomfortable, because they remind us of our vulnerability, fragility, and contingency.

Job, as you will remember, for all of his faith, gets a very raw deal, loses essentially everything, and pleads the injustice of all of it. After thirty-five chapters of Job's sitting in ashes, kvetching and resisting the temptation of friends to swear off his honor and his faith, God at last shows up in a tempest.

God's opening response to Job's great existential questions, for all of its divine poetry, boils down to:

"Excuse me? Who are you?"

But I chuckle most at the way God's words to Job begin: Get up, gird up your loins, and in language that is fully recognizable to us millennia after this ancient story was put to paper: *Be a man*.

For all of our efforts in the liberal West, and indeed the liberal Church, to be filled with mercy and sympathy, this is a bracing message from a God of love. In our cultural language, even as we continue to wrestle our way out of the traps of patriarchy and its more narrow and clear-cut definitions of what it means to be a man or a woman, we are asked in no uncertain terms to grow up by all three of today's readings -- to grow up as God asks Job to grow up. There is little room for whining and complaining -- or perhaps a lot of room, if you take the proportions of the Book Job at face value. But it avails us little. God still expects us to grow up.

For the Church in Corinth, a small community likely swimming mightily upstream against the prevailing culture of the city and with little, if any backing from a deep faith tradition that we might have, this, too is a bracing message from Paul, their spiritual guardian. "We urge you not to accept the grace of God in vain," he tells them. In a rhetorical flourish he is -- perhaps a bit more gently than the divine voice in Job, but passionately, nonetheless -- asking them to grow up and take responsibility for their faith. A faith which should not depend on what has happened or what might happen or what will happen -- good, bad, or indifferent. He delivers a laundry list of what the saints have already dealt with, commending to the Corinthians a truer faith, a deeper faith, than they have held thus far.

And then there's the Gospel -- a beloved one from Mark, worthy of countless paintings, icons, and stories across the centuries. Beloved, but mystic and mysterious. It is Mark's favorite way of posing questions to the faithful in the Christian Way. We might be startled that Jesus is not more affirming of the disciples' apparent faith by waking him and asking for his help. Isn't that what we're supposed to do when we're in trouble? But Jesus is unimpressed. . . if not mildly disdainful.

The story poses a deeper question, challenging a faith that appears to be largely in the habit of asking for help:

Is it faithful enough just to expect God to shield us or at least rescue us from suffering? Is it faithful to -- in the vernacular -- pop the God pill when the going gets rough?

Truth is, we want a more sympathetic Jesus when it comes to our fears and worries -- all the limits we put on God's grace acting through us so we might place safe bets, or reasonably safe ones. Ones that are excusable even if they don't work. I'll take the boat with the big engines, tough anchors, and metal gunnels, thank you very much! Taken to the extreme, we want to be armed to the teeth with good protection. Insured to the hilt. Guarded with the best. This is the way of the world. But it is not the way of faith. Put another way, we want a Savior who will safeguard us from the sufferings of this life. A bit of a cosmic insurance policy.

But the way of faith, fortunately or unfortunately, is not about being hemmed in by a God who protects us or shields us from the plight of living. No, it is indeed about growing up. Of becoming more vulnerable, not less. Of offering more in the way of Christ Jesus. When we baptize Tess Phleger today, we are not baptizing her into perpetual childhood, but into a life of faith -- a life of faith that will not simply grow with her, but challenge her and invite her to grow through all the bumps and turns of the journey ahead. We are baptizing her and acknowledging the grace that we step into or stumble upon when life is hardest and Jesus seems asleep in the back of the boat.

Baptism, I always warn parents, is not like purchasing salvation insurance. Nor is it a quick ticket to success in life, or a get-out-of-suffering-free card. We are not talking about spiritual Monopoly here. And actually, that is a good thing. Formulaic faith doesn't work very well, and -- if you try it for very long -- well, it ends up posing more problems and dead ends than open and life-giving paths.

True faith is about relationship that turns stony hearts into fleshy ones. That calls us into the depths of mystery in relationship with this strange and marvelous God who laid the foundations of the Cosmos, of our lives, of our being. Who summons us out of darkness of our own self-centeredness and into the light of truth. Who teases us out of trying to play god ourselves. Who hooks us with a message of comforting love, and then reminds us that love is not at all about comfort, but self-giving -- learning to give with a growing humility that expects nothing in return, but learns instead to hope. Who runs ahead of us, paving the way, but with a roadmap that is as inscrutable as the woof and warp of space and time. Who rides with us in the boat even in the worst of storms.

We welcome Tess this day into this life of wonder. Our promise? No guarantees of an uneventful journey. In fact, Tess and her family have learned already in the Christian Way to expect the unexpected. Tess's very presence with us this morning is witness to that! No, our promise is no more, but also no less, than a promise to walk with her and grow closer and more deeply on the journey into that full stature in Christ -- to grow up with her in faith. A faith that is ever pointing God-ward, towards our salvation, and born on the wings of the Spirit.