

Church of the Crossroads
Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 25, 2006
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A CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE

Job 38:1-11
Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32
Mark 4:35-41

There is something that Job must learn, something the disciples of Jesus must also learn, and something that we must learn as well. And that something is this: in life as we experience and live it, *there is nothing settled or sure or reliable except the overwhelmingness of God.* (Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 391)

In the unsettledness and the uncertainty and the unreliability of life, we human beings seem to have a tremendous need for settledness and certainty and reliability, but there is nothing the world can offer that can in the end satisfy these needs. Even God does not exist to satisfy our need for security. Our need for settledness and certainty and reliability is of little importance to God in comparison to God's call to discipleship that is given to us in Jesus the Christ.

In the midst of life's uncertainty, Job, in the midst of his profound suffering, questions life's fairness:

*Why do the wicked live on,
reach old age, and grow mighty in power?
Their children are established in their presence,
and their offspring before their eyes.
Their houses are safe from fear,
and no rod of God is upon them.
Their bull breeds without fail;
their cows calves and never miscarries.
They send out their little ones like a flock,
and their children dance around.
They sing to the tambourine and the lyre,
and rejoice to the sound of the pipe.*

*They spend their days in prosperity,
and in peace they go down to Sheol.
They say to God, 'Leave us alone!
We do not desire to know your ways.
What is the Almighty that we should serve the Almighty?
And what profit do we get if we pray to the Almighty?
Is not their prosperity indeed their own achievement?
- Job 21:7-16*

Life is unfair, says Job. The righteous suffer. The wicked prosper. Now, Job does not question God directly. His questioning is a response to the friend named Zophar. Yet, by implication, Job is indeed questioning God. Why is this so, God? If you are God, why cannot it be that the righteous prosper and the wicked suffer instead of the other way around?

Job's need to know, Job's questioning is mirrored in the questioning of the disciples when their boat is caught in a raging storm on the Sea of Galilee. Just as Job experiences God as distant and unconcerned, so do the disciples experience Jesus the same way when the storm arises. The windstorm rises and the waves beat into the boat, and where is Jesus? He is in the stern, asleep on the one cushion to be found. They wake him up. "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

In the midst of life's uncertainty, unsettledness, and yes, unfairness, we question the One who is surely there to meet our human need. Why do you not care? Why do you not answer our prayers? To get some relief in our lives, we may even join a church! We shop around for a church that can meet our needs. If we sense that too many demands are placed upon us in a particular congregation, we continue our search for a church that will meet our needs, give us some relief, and also the answers to all our questions.

The American church has become "needs orientated" institutions. We do have needs, certainly. There are times when the church should be for us a place of solace and comfort. But having our spiritual needs met is not the chief end of Christian faith. The purpose of Christian faith is not first and foremost to have our needs met; rather, it is the purpose of Christian faith to make disciples of us. And that is very different than having our needs met and our questions answered.

You will recall that in the end, Job's questions about the ways of God in relation to life's unfairness remain unanswered. God refuses to answer. Job's questioning of the ways of God is replaced by God's questioning of Job. God answers Job out of the whirlwind:

*Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?
Gird up your loins like a man,
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.*

*“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements – surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone
when the morning stars sang together
and when the heavenly beings shouted for joy?
- Job 38:1-7*

In like manner, in the Gospel story, the questioning of the disciples is replaced by the questions Jesus directs to them. “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” In the midst of life's unsettledness, life's uncertainty, and life's unreliability, out of our need, we pour out our questions, but rarely consider the questions that are being asked of us.

John Ralston Saul, the Canadian humanist and philosopher, begins his little book *The Unconscious Civilization* by quoting the 12th century philosopher, John of Salisbury, who asked “Who is more contemptible than the human being who scorns knowledge of himself or herself?” (May John of Salisbury forgive me for making his language more inclusive.) The question posed to us by John of Salisbury is whether or not we are willing to entertain self-examination. The important thing may not be the questions we ask of God arising out of our need for security in the midst of an uncertain life. The important thing may well be the questions we ought to be asking ourselves.

John Ralston Saul goes on to describe our civilization as an unconscious civilization. We, as a civilization, are unwilling to address questions that are being asked of us. Our civilization does not want to examine itself. Why is it that we seem bent upon our destructive paths, I hope we will all take the time to see the film *An Inconvenient Truth* now

playing at The Varsity and then ask ourselves why it is that we seem so bent upon our destructive path and yet are so afraid, it seems, to raise the ethical questions that are so necessary if we are to alter our course.

In the context of the Christian faith, the questions are the questions Jesus asked of the disciples. “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” These questions reveal a crisis of confidence in the disciples, and by implication, in us as well. Now, the word *confidence* is an interesting one. Literally, it means “*with faith*.” To live confidently is to live with faith, not with certainty, not with sight, not with answers, not even with assurances. To live confidently is to live with faith, with trust that the God who questions us is the same God who leads us, no matter what the chance and change of life brings us. This is the same God who “shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb, who “made the clouds its garment and thick darkness its swaddling band,” who “prescribed bounds for it and sets bars and doors, who said, “Thus far shall you come, and no father, and here shall your proud waves be stopped.” This is the same God who in Jesus the Christ rebukes the wind, and says to the sea, “Peace, be still.”

Such a God is to be trusted, no matter what befalls us. Such a God does not exist to answer our questions or meet our needs, but rather addresses us and calls us to faithful discipleship. God calls us to love in the midst of life’s unreliability and uncertainty, to love our neighbor as ourselves, indeed to love the earth as ourselves. God calls us to be makers of peace and doers of justice in a world that knows too little peace and enjoys too little justice.

Somehow, we need to move beyond the crisis of confidence in which we ourselves seem to be caught these days, and say “yes” to both the cost and the joy of discipleship once again, leaving our fears and our own need for certainty behind, and trusting in God’s overwhelming and mysterious presence and leading in our lives, and all this in the midst of life’s unsettledness. Truly, this is what faith requires. And so, in the words of the Jim Strathdee we used to sing, “let us say ‘yes’ to the calling; fear not the falling, and trust in God’s plan.” Amen.