

The Rev. Dennis J. Reid

A Sermon for the Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost, Year B | Mark 10:35-45; Job 38:1-7, 34-41; Hebrews 5:1-10

St. Alban's Church, Sinking Spring, PA

October 21st 2018

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

A few weeks back, we were one chapter earlier in Mark's Gospel, and the disciples were on the road arguing amongst themselves as to who was the greatest among them. It wasn't a particular highlight for the twelve, and when Jesus comes along to them, he asks them about the nature of their conversation. They remain silent, unable to find the words to justify such a self-righteously boastful claim of one's own greatness. They sheepishly know they've just had the kind of conversation in which Jesus would never have participated.

Fast forward a chapter to what we've just heard now and James and John have, apparently, found the words necessary to make such a claim, and that's what they're after, sharing in God's glory for their own benefit. I wonder what changed since the previous conversation. Perhaps at some point, these two brothers started brainstorming about how they might achieve a little glory for themselves. Maybe they're tired of playing second fiddle and truly believe that they have earned more power and prominence among Jesus' followers. Certainly they've seen some things, haven't they? Their resume isn't too shabby -- they're among the first called by Jesus, and to their credit, they leave their poor father Zebedee all alone in his boat to follow Jesus immediately. And besides Peter, they're the only two who witness the Transfiguration of Jesus, when he was upon the mountaintop and transfigured briefly with a stunning, bright light -- a glimpse of his real and future glory.

Regardless of what they'd done or witnessed, it's still took a fair amount of bravado to approach Jesus and say "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." That's an easy line to miss. This is a well-enough known story that the details can get a bit glossed over. But really think of the audacity it took for James and John to approach Jesus and in no uncertain terms demand for him to do whatever they pleased. I imagine that line being spoken with such certainty and confidence that Jesus might have even chuckled to himself at hearing it, and humors them to see exactly what they had in mind. "Grant us to sit one at your right hand and one at your left in your glory," they answer. Hmm.

As we've heard in the rest of our readings, to presume one's own place of honor before God is not the greatest idea the people of God have ever had. And I say the people of God because many have made this same misstep. From the Tower of Babel to the Golden Calf, it's a constant theme in scripture, and we get it again today. We heard the beginning of the end of the book of Job -- perhaps the greatest consideration of the dreaded topic of "why bad things happen to good people" in all of scripture. And yes, throughout his story, Job goes through quite a lot -- loses his family, gets sick, undergoes great suffering -- enough so to question God and to assume that he knew better than God did about the nature of suffering and the ways of the world -- to which God simply and firmly answers with God's own resume: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements--surely you know!"

It's one of my favorite lines in all of scripture -- not because God is throwing the gauntlet down against Job but simply saying what is true. What is undeniable. What cannot be equaled by our own desire for personal greatness. These would have been hard words to hear for Job, I'd think, but the reality of the situation must have been loud and clear. For all that we don't know, for all the glory we might seek, for all the ways in which we may be tempted to be like God, we cannot be. God is our creator, we are the created. I'm not sure we'd actually want to be God given the chance. Because when we are faced with our own humanity and imperfections before God, that is when the true desires of our hearts -- which is to know God, not to be God -- is heard in our prayers, straight from our very hearts.

For Job, after contemplating God's resume, the prayer of his heart sounded like this:

"I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.
I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you;
and repent in dust and ashes."

For James and John, humility came later, as James was martyred and John became known as the beloved disciple, and in John's Gospel he is present at the crucifixion when Jesus calls him to care for his mother Mary. It leads James and John realize that there is such a notion as being careful for what we pray for. "We are able," they say eagerly to Jesus when he questions whether they can handle the same things he must do. And they do; they will be humbled by the responsibilities given to them.

As was Christ, though he needn't have been. The letter to the Hebrews tells of Christ's great humility, his utmost obedience and faithfulness, our great high priest who knew the language of prayer like no other. And yet he did not presume to seek the honor of his priesthood, but instead came to serve, to give his life as a ransom for many.

I believe we read and hear so many biblical stories about our yearning for personal glory because it is a recurring reality of the human condition. Job, James, John, and perhaps even all of us might be able to think on certain things for which we've prayed that we do not remember fondly or proudly. We all may have our own version of "Grant us whatever we'd like, O God." or "Grant me my own glory." Instead, there are plenty of helpful ways that we can pray to God for ourselves, but those cannot be our only prayers, and when we do pray them, we must remember that we are praying for God's will to be done, and that God might be glorified by our requests. So instead of asking God to help us receive our glory, may we seek God so that God's will may be done through us for God's glory. For as Jesus says, "whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." This is what it means to give like Jesus. Just think of it as the next thing in your prayer homework -- O God, help us to see your kingdom like children; help us to see where you are calling us in this community; and help us to give as Christ did, of our whole selves, as one who serves, that we might seek not our own glory, but yours.

Amen.