

The Sunday Missive -- October 6, 2024
The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
Blessing of the Animals

Hymn 495 Hail, thou once despised Jesus

Hail, thou once despised Jesus! Hail, thou Galilean King!
Thou didst suffer to release us; thou didst free salvation bring.
Hail, thou universal Savior, bearer of our sin and shame!
By thy merit we find favor: life is given through thy Name.

Paschal Lamb, by God appointed, all our sins on thee were laid:
By almighty love anointed, thou hast full atonement made.
All thy people are forgiven through the virtue of thy blood:
Opened is the gate of heaven, reconciled are we with God.

Jesus, hail! enthroned in glory, there forever to abide;
All the heavenly hosts adore thee, seated at thy Father's side.
There for sinners thou art pleading: there thou dost our place prepare;
Ever for us interceding, till in glory we appear.

Worship, honor, power, and blessing thou art worthy to receive;
Highest praises, without ceasing, right it is for us to give.
Help, ye bright angelic spirits, all your noblest anthems raise;
Help to sing our Savior's merits, help to chant Emmanuel's praise!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jo9WVbqSQ0E>

The Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray, and to give more than we either desire or deserve: Pour upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things for which we are not worthy to ask, except through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Savior; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Job 1:1; 2:1-10

There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.

One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the Lord. The Lord said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the Lord, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." The Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason." Then Satan answered the Lord, "Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." The Lord said to Satan, "Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life."

So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.

Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die." But he said to her, "You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

Psalm 26

Give judgment for me, O Lord, for I have lived with integrity* ***I have trusted in the Lord and have not faltered.***

Test me, O Lord, and try me* ***Examine my heart and my mind.***

For your love is before my eyes* ***I have walked faithfully with you.***

I have not sat with evildoers* ***Nor do I consort with the deceitful.***

I have hated the company of liars* ***I will not enable the wicked.***

I will wash my hands in innocence, O Lord* ***That I may dance in procession round your altar,***

Singing aloud songs of thanksgiving* ***And recounting your wondrous deeds.***

O Lord, I love the house where you dwell* ***The place where your glory abides.***

Do not sweep me away with the wicked* ***Nor bind my life with those who thirst for blood,***

Whose hands are full of evil plots* ***And their right hand full of bribes.***

As for me, I will live with integrity* ***Redeem me, O Lord; have pity on me.***

May my foot ever stand on level ground* ***And in the full assembly may I bless the Lord.***

Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels. But someone has testified somewhere, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mere mortals, that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honor; put all things under their feet."

Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying, "I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you."

Hymn 398 I sing the almighty power of God

I sing the almighty power of God, that made the mountains rise,
That spread the flowing seas abroad and built the lofty skies.

I sing the wisdom that ordained the sun to rule the day;
The moon shines full at his command, and all the stars obey.

I sing the goodness of the Lord, that filled the earth with food;
He formed the creatures with his Word, and then pronounced them good.

Lord, how thy wonders are displayed, where'er I turn my eye,
If I survey the ground I tread, or gaze upon the sky!

There's not a plant or flower below, but makes thy glories known;
And clouds arise, and tempests blow, by order from thy throne;

While all that borrows life from thee is ever in thy care,
And everywhere that I could be, thou, God, art present there.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2GFuwi_5yqo

Mark 10:2-16

Some Pharisees came, and to test Jesus they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this

reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Forget Why – Proper 22B

Theodicy – The justice of God -- How can a benevolent Creator allow bad things to happen to good people? Some say this question is beyond our comprehension. Two basic answers are 1, that God is flippant, vindictive, cruel and unpredictable, flipping a coin between Nectar Mai Tais, or whatever they drink up there in Heaven, and condemning or preserving based on random selection to teach us a lesson in acceptance, and subservience. On this view, our fate is based on God's whims, and there is no apparent reason to pay any attention to the way of righteousness and compassion, because it won't do us a bit of good anyway. This is also known as determinism, or predestination.

The other answer says that all of Creation was set in motion by the Prime Mover, the original Force of Nature, The Lord of Hosts who made both Heaven and Earth, and who has vowed to interfere neither in human affairs nor in the Natural Order. Nature is what it is, and we have to deal with it. On this view, Humanity has been given consciousness in order to enjoy and engender righteousness if we will,

by walking the way of truth, compassion, justice and stewardship of the Earth. God will bring about perfection someday, but human history is about what happens in the meantime: how we relate to each other and to our environment in the context of natural forces and human proclivities. Meanwhile, God looks on and laughs or cries, comforts or condemns based on how we do, but does not interfere.

Some say the question is beyond our comprehension, because they don't like the second answer. They don't feel like walking, so they declare the path unfit. But as the Wolof say, *Méré mandinj doc bu gaaw-a-ko gën*. "It's better to walk than to be angry at the road." Walking means trying to understand what God wants, then staying true to that, come what may. We can forget about our righteousness, about our payoff, our personal feelings and preferences and simply remember what it felt like not to be connected. We have no reason to do good except that having been at the crossroads, we have perceived the more gracious way to be attractive, preferable, even irresistible for those who are really listening.

James Gustafson has written of the contrast between a "utilitarian" religion that justifies religious faith by its benefits for human persons and a genuinely "theo-centric" fidelity and piety focused on serving God and God's purposes without reference to the self."

Some suffering is brought on ourselves, but some, if not most, is undeserved. There is only one formula for the path, and that is to persist in seeking ways to the Good, no matter what our personal circumstances. Love God by loving neighbor and we might add, neighborhood (as in the planet itself), and try to accept our immediate outcomes, especially when they involve suffering, as our own part of human history, subject to cosmic resolution on that great day when we all cross the Jordan together.

This is not to say that loving the neighbor and the neighborhood are purely mental and emotional undertakings. Loving the neighbor also involves establishing governance and enforcing laws that seek to protect the innocent and oppressed. For example, regulating and reducing the presence of guns, not because you can't handle them, but because we – as a race of people – can't handle them. God is God and will not interfere, but we must interfere, and do something different

when what we're doing isn't working. Shtuff happens, it's true, but when it comes to human shtuff, we are responsible for making changes in what happens.

Maia Kotrosits and Hal Taussig have observed in their provocative book *Rereading the Gospel of Mark Amidst Loss and Trauma* "Following Jesus turns out to have a quirky mix of joy, plot twists, disturbing events, inspiring people and harrowing challenges. Mark's story especially forces unpleasant and beautiful surprises on the reader, and following Jesus entails confronting all kinds of pain, reworking one's expectations, and being ambushed by goodness."

So they asked him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "The law says yes, because God knows you're going to do it anyway. But when people marry, the two are no longer two, but one flesh, and therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate. Which means whoever divorces a spouse commits adultery." You don't make a commitment, then dismiss it when you feel like it. Let no one separate them. However. If, after prayerful consideration, mutual admission of realities, however painful, and with a true desire on the part of each to care for the spirit of the other, two people decide to forgive each other that commitment and create space in both of their lives for newly created commitments, then no one is putting those people asunder. This is a whole lot less neat and tidy than, "No divorce, ever, period," but it is whole lot more realistic and redemptive. Perhaps God allows a do-over. God must allow do-overs, or how many of us would be sitting here.

Often we talk about the intention and workings of God – in Nature, of Nature, indeed as Nature. Lenny has thoughtfully pointed out that the great thinker Baruch Spinoza came up with this way of thinking about God a long time ago. For his trouble, he was excommunicated from the synagogue for daring to broaden the conversation about God beyond accepted doctrines. Spinoza was saved from ignominy and supported wholeheartedly by a new community, and of course nowadays this way of thinking about God can be very helpful. For example, instead of being cursed for saying such things as these, I personally was rewarded by Nature in the form of a little furry quadruped, rescued from disease and starvation and, for a decade so far, providing me the

“quirky mix of joy and challenges” that come with canine companionship.

As you know, the creature’s name is Fulu, which I made up because I thought it would be fun to say. But further research shows that Fulu was a word already. In Chinese, in the Taoist religion, the Fu were holy seers who could draw and write supernatural talismans that functioned as summons or instructions to deities and spirits, as tools of exorcism, and as medicinal potions known as Fulu. So perhaps this is a holy dog after all; I have kept a close eye on him, just in case.

Fulu, not to be confused with Zulu, the African tribe whose dispersion extends to Tanzania, whither this community once sent a much needed four wheel drive ambulance as a gift.

Also not to be confused with Bulu, as in *Alah le bulu*, a Mandinka proverb from the other side of that continent. *Alah le bulu* means “God disposes.” We hear Job addressing his friends and his family with this very sentiment: “The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away; blessed be the Name of the Lord. God disposes; Nature runs its course. It is truly horrifying to think of God allowing one of his minions, Satan, to goad him into endorsing Job’s torture just to prove Job’s allegiance to The Name of the Lord. What can be stunning and sad and frightening, but not inexplicably horrifying, is the reality that Nature’s course involves human suffering.

That this is an unshakable truth means that we attribute to Nature’s course anything moral or situational or theological at the peril of our spiritual lives. If the presence of guns in our culture is ruining too many lives, we can’t blame God – or Nature. If our behavior is ruining our climate, we can’t blame God – or the planet. And we can’t expect to live without suffering and pain, despite what the hospital billboards say. Like Job, we don’t have to like the pain, the tragedy, the betrayals and disappointments that life brings to us, along with our joys and pleasures, but also like Job, we can know that those agonies need not define our embrace of, and reliance upon the God of all Creation, any more than we can expect or even hope for a life free of pain. We can, instead recall that God is with us in the midst of all our sufferings, and that God’s plan is for us to have hopefulness and peace in our hearts no matter what the physical world and the people in it do

to us. We can, like Job, know that our redeemer lives, who will raise us up on the last day. And we can continue to try changing what we can change.

“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet; it looks like you want us to be in charge. That’s what gets us so confused, that we are clearly supposed to be in charge, but there is so much we can’t control.

Now they say that in subjecting all things to humanity, God left nothing outside our control. You and I both know that not everything is in subjection to us, far from it; least of all ourselves. But we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, so that he might overcome death for everyone. God made the pioneer of our salvation perfect through sufferings, and Jesus is not ashamed to call us sisters and brothers, because whether we celebrate or suffer, we too are saved by knowing we belong in the arms of God. This gives us the freedom to do what we can while we can and to let go of the question: “Why?”

Hymn 344 Lord dismiss us with thy blessing

Lord, dismiss us with thy blessing; fill our hearts with joy and peace;
Let us each, thy love possessing, triumph in redeeming grace:
O refresh us, O refresh us, traveling through this wilderness.

Thanks we give and adoration for thy Gospel's joyful sound:
May the fruits of thy salvation in our hearts and lives abound:
Ever faithful, ever faithful to thy truth may we be found;

So that when thy love shall call us, Savior, from the world away,
Fear of death shall not appall us, glad thy summons to obey.
May we ever, may we ever reign with thee in endless day.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NofzlODij2k&t=44s>

My Sadness

Another year is coming to an end
but my old tee shirts will not be back –

the pea-green one from Trinity College,
gunked with streaks of lawnmower grease,

the one with orange bat wings
from Diamond Cavern, Kentucky

vanished
without a trace.

After a two-day storm I wander the beach
admiring the ocean's lack of attachment.

I huddle beneath a seashell,
lonely as an exile.

My sadness is the sadness of water fountains.
My sadness is as ordinary as these gulls

importuning for Cheetos or scraps
of peanut butter sandwiches.

Feed them a single crust
and they will never leave you alone.

Campbell McGrath