

**The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith**

**Holy Comforter**

**Richmond, VA**

**October 18, 2015; 21st Sunday after Pentecost**

**Readings:** Job 38:1-7, 34-41; Psalm 104:1-9, 25, 37b; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45.

## **Face to Face with God**

The disciples, who have left everything to follow Jesus, ask what they will get in return.

In today's reading from Mark, they ask specifically for places of honor, one to sit at Jesus right and one to sit at his left, in his glory.

We might think that Jesus would leave that possibility open, considering his glory refers to in the life after this one, however, Jesus does not let it go with a vague sort of support for the idea, but instead asks them how closely they are willing to follow.

Closely.

But even so, such future positions are not in any one's control, and anyway, greatness is achieved by serving others, not ruling others, or having places of honor.

Jesus was always doing this, right?

Turning what seemed to make sense upside down.

Jesus seems to be saying, what his followers do is important, but what they, or we, do will not control the future...will not control God...that with God we cannot earn it...whatever it may be.

Long before Jesus, there was a man named Job.

Job and all his friends thought that they understood the world...God...how it all worked.

Job was rich and successful, surrounded by family and animals...because, many thought, he was in God's good graces because he was a righteous man, living a Godly life.

One day, heavenly beings and Satan come to visit God.

God asks them where they have been, and Satan says that he has been

“going to and fro on the earth.”

Seen, Job, have you?--God asks.

God asks if Satan has run into Job during his travels on earth...yes, Satan says, and then God speaks of Job's faith and goodness, and that there is no one as faithful as Job on the earth.

Sure, Satan says, but haven't you been protecting him, providing for him; if things were to go wrong for Job, even he would curse you, God.

God is willing to take on this challenge from Satan, which is calling into question the motives of Job for loving God...and ultimately all human faith and allegiance with God...is it based on true devotion to God as an end in itself, and good behavior as an end in itself...or is it because we expect something in return?

Satan says humankind is not that devoted, but only seems to love God but in fact love the blessings; but God maintains that Job will stay faithful even if he is not receiving material blessings.

God has faith in Job; and Job stays true for a time, but as things get worse, loss of his possessions, his family, his own health...Job does curse God, and demands an answer from God...why have I been suffering, Job wants to know.

Before all this suffering started, Job was sure that he understood God...that if he was righteous and continued on a righteous path, God would continue to bless him.

When that does not go as planned, Job is confused, it does not make sense, and for a time he is quiet...even his friends are quiet, for a time...but then they too start to justify Job's misfortune as punishment from God for sins Job has committed.

Job protests and demands an answer from God.

By the time we get to our reading for today from the Book of Job, God is responding to Job, out of a whirlwind, God speaks: “*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?*”

*Tell me, if you have understanding.  
 Who determined its measurements-- surely you know!....  
 Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, so that a flood of waters  
 may cover you?  
 Can you send forth lightnings....”*

When I think of God’s encounter and response to Job, I think of a TV show from the early 2000s, called *Joan of Arcadia*. In the first episode, Joan, a teenager meets a teenage boy at school. The boy tells Joan that he is God and that he has work for her to do; he wants her to get a job at a bookstore. Joan is not buying any of that and says something like “prove it.” The boy motions to a tree and says, “there.” Incredulous, Joan says, “that’s just a tree.” And the boy says, “Let’s see you make one.” One of the delightful aspects of that show was that God shows up as various people, from a little girl to an elderly person, in all our shapes and sizes, in all our skin tones...for it is in the fullness of human diversity that we see God.

Seeing God face to face, does not solve all of Joan’s problems or answer all her questions...like why God won’t heal her brother who is not able to walk and in wheelchair.

Some members of the Presbyterian Church found this TV show to be so engaging theologically that they created a study and discussion guide to go with each episode.

They write: *Joan of Arcadia brings up more theological questions than it answers. Joan wants to know why God won't intervene to heal her brother so he can walk again. She wonders if God will make her “burst into flames” if she doesn't do what God asks.*<sup>1</sup>

This show is much more about listening for God and following as one is

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<sup>1</sup> [http://store.pcusa.org/6827006027\\_2](http://store.pcusa.org/6827006027_2) -- The study guide is available from this website.

able rather than getting answers to questions.

Asking the questions and living into the questions---this is what we do, and who we are in the Episcopal Church.

Also in the introduction to this study guide about Joan of Arcadia, they write:

*“Religious” is not a word Joan would use to describe herself. There are few references to church or a religious community in Joan of Arcadia. When religious leaders appear on the show, they are usually not helpful, which leaves Joan pretty much on her own with God.*

They are probably not helpful because they are so sure then know the answers, so sure they can explain why things happen and how God is involved.

Seeing God face to face did not answer all of Joan’s questions; seeing God in Christ face to face did not answer the disciples questions in a way that they understood fully at the time.

Seeing God face to face did not answer Job’s questions or solve his problems.

But it helped him gain some perspective.

Where were you, God asks Job, when I created the earth?

Well, no where, of course.

Can you do this and you do that...Job, well no.

We’ve had to listen to Job’s friends for chapters try to explain what was happening, Job’s suffering, in ways that did not seem to ring true to Job...that it was his fault...so he finally hears from God, and nothing about the suffering is really explained.

We can feel for Job, but we are reading and hearing about a story that is thousands of years old.

This matter of theodicy, ---why the innocent suffer---why doesn’t God fix

it--becomes much more pressing for us when it is our life, when it is our suffering or the suffering of those of we love, or the suffering of humanity on a larger scale to which we relate.

Seeing Jesus face to face was not an experience of all the questions being answered...as we read again and again in the Gospels about the confusion of the disciples.

In fact, one can reasonably, theologically, argue that God came face to face with humanity in Christ, so that God could answer some of God's questions...learn more about the human experience, and there by enter into the human experience more fully.

In the end, Job finds peace not in answers but in the experience of God, in the experience of being in God's presence.

Next week in the lectionary we hear Job say to God:

"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;  
therefore I despise myself,  
and repent in dust and ashes."

Job feels great humility in the presence of God.  
He find peace, but not answers.

God came to us in Christ...in the face of Jesus...in a way that changed everything.

The theme song from the *Joan of Arcadia* show, is  
Joan Osborne's "One of Us"

*If God had a name, what would it be? And would you call it to his face, If you were faced with Him in all His glory? What would you ask if you had*

*just one question? What if God was one of us? Just a slob like one of us? Just a stranger on the bus. Trying to make His way home? If God had a face, what would it look like? And would you want to see If seeing meant that you would have to believe In things like Heaven and in Jesus and the saints And all the prophets?*<sup>2</sup>

We do claim that God was one of us...that we have seen...and yet....

Seeing face to face in this life is still limited, on this side of heaven there will always be questions that we cannot answer to our satisfaction....but God is with us, in the questions, in the suffering, in way that makes a difference.

Job found peace in the midst of suffering.

Some say that the Book of Job ends with just that...rather than the final verses found on our Bibles, in which God restores Job's fortune, his life, his health.

Being in God's presence, Job's faith is strengthened even though his questions remained unanswered.

Seeing God in all God's glory and experiencing all of God's grace is yet to come for us...yes we know it in part...and we need hold on to that when times are hard...when we suffer, when we hurt.

We do see, we have seen God, in part...but it is as Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

“...now we see in a mirror, dimly,  
but then we will see face to face.  
Now I know only in part;  
then I will know fully,  
even as I have been fully known.”<sup>3</sup>  
Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/joanosborne/oneofus.html>

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12