

10-13-2024 Words of Worship

Welcome...

Opportunities

- Sharolyn Flaming Jackson will be our guest speaker for Sr. Coffee this Friday. She's with the K-State Research and Extension office and she'll be telling us about "Blue Zones: Keys to Living Longer and Better". There are some researched and proven habits of people in five different regions that seem to contribute to their longevity and health.
- We had our first mid-week meal and evening of activities this past week. It's a great time to be together, to touch base with one another mid-week, to eat and fellowship, sing and learn together. If you're willing to help with bringing a dessert or to serve or clean up in the kitchen, please sign up in the south lobby. Thanks!

Call to Worship --

Opening Prayer – O God, we claim your presence here with us this morning through your Holy Spirit. We thank you for this time of worship and we ask that the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts would be acceptable and please to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Salvation. Amen.

Morning Prayer –

Dear God, as the earth continues to groan from the weight of neglect, wars being waged, injustices being perpetrated, people simply not caring for one another in the ways you had imagined we might, we come to you in prayer, acknowledging that we are complicit in some of the mess. Some of our complicity we're aware of – and some we don't even know. Help us, God, to be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves. That requires us to listen carefully for your guidance and your wisdom.

We pray for those still in the midst of clean-up from the hurricanes – even as we hear about the next storms forming in the hot, angry oceans. We thank you, God, for those who are offering aid, for those who are reaching out to neighbors and for those working hard to help people who need it.

God, we thank you for times to gather as your people of faith, for worship, fellowship, coffee and study. Let us not take those opportunities for granted, but remember that we need one another, we need those times of being together to strengthen our faith in you and our commitment to each other through the church.

We're grateful for the bonds of love that we share with our families and friends. We're especially thankful for the safe and welcome arrival of Eden Friedberg and we ask that you would continue to be with Kendra and Kevin, Levi and Aubryn, Dwight and Tammy and other family members. Bless each of them as they adjust to a new family member.

Be with us now throughout this worship service and into the coming days, Lord. Help us to stay attuned to the nudging of your Spirit so that we can show your love and shine your light in this world.

Message -- When God doesn't play by the rules

Pastor Lois Harder

In the bulletin, we have the Job passage listed on the first page under “Gathering to Worship” and then at the top of the 2nd page under “Hearing God’s Word” Nathaniel read the Gospel passage. We were, in fact, “hearing God’s word” when we heard both passages, it’s just that sometimes we have to make things fit in the bulletin! But Job and the rest of the Old Testament, the Hebrew scriptures... it’s all part of God’s Word that we’re hearing this morning. Now, I’ll confess that in some ways, I would be just as glad – a little relieved, actually – if the book of Job was NOT included in the Revised Common Lectionary from which we’re taking our texts to preach this fall. I’m glad it’s in the canon; it’s important for us to read and try to get our heads around it, but it’s not particularly uplifting or easy. I have to credit (or blame) Julianna. She’ll be preaching on October 27 – two weeks from today and when I invited her to preach she got back to me frighteningly quickly and asked whether Luann and I might be touching on the Job passages, so that there could be a little Job mini-series. “Sure!” we both responded, “we can do that!” I’m very eager to hear what Julianna will have for us in a couple of weeks.

When we meet Job in chapter 23, he’s in the depths. And he’s been in the depths since chapter 2. From chapter 3 all the way through chapter 31 Job engaged his “friends” and then God in a long series of dialogues in which he cried out, defended himself, grieved bitterly and tried to figure out “Where is God??” in the midst of unspeakable tragedy that he had suffered and continued to suffer.

Here’s the story in a nutshell... The very first verse of this book says, “A man in the land of Uz was named Job.” Job was likely not a historical person (although he could have been) and Uz, was not a place known within the ancient Israelite world. The writer wanted the readers to understand that this story takes place outside of the regular expectations and purview. Job is described as an upright and righteous man. He was honest, full of integrity. He loved God and he honored God’s covenant throughout his life. Job was pure – sinless! There didn’t even seem to be a little peccadillo hiding in his closet. But even so, Job had experienced horrific and unexplainable losses. He had been wealthy and successful. One by one, his herds and herdsmen, his children and their families, all were struck dead – a total loss. A calamity. Then Job himself, in the midst of his grief, was struck by illness and sores on his body. His wife encouraged him to curse God and die, but he would not. His steadfast faithfulness to God remained intact. Three of his friends came to sit with him, to console and comfort him and he was in such great pain that they wept and they tore their clothes and scattered ashes on their heads and then they sat with him. In silence. For seven days and seven nights. And if they could have just stayed silent, they might have been better friends, but they tried to “console” him by suggesting that he must have sinned. Big. Because that’s the only way they could make any sense out of what was happening to Job. This is a story that asks us to think about the big, existential questions. Who are we? What is the meaning of our life? Who is God? Do our lives really matter to a Creator so far beyond our grasp and understanding?

The book of Job is considered wisdom literature and in the genre of Wisdom literature, there’s Proverbial wisdom that we’re much more familiar and comfortable with. It represents both the ancient Hebrew understanding of how the world works and in 2024 we pretty much have this same understanding. Proverbial wisdom like, from Proverbs, brings with it a kind of “if/then” way of thinking about things. IF we live good and upright lives, THEN God (and the cosmos)

will honor that and things ought to be, generally, be pretty good for us. IF, on the other hand, we live scandalous, sinful lives, even lives that are sort of “on the edge”, the conventional, proverbial wisdom is that we’re probably playing with fire and things will likely NOT go so well for us. In other words, we generally kind of get what we deserve. Some call it karma, or kismet. Some call it destiny or fate, or God’s plan. In the book of Job we find a different kind of wisdom. It has been called “speculative” wisdom or existential wisdom. It is NOT necessarily the kind of “wisdom” that gives us a lot of comfort when we’re asking the big questions about why bad things happen to good people or how the faithful can possibly remain faithful when they experience what seems to be underserved tragedy.

Most of us have already learned that ultimately we cannot predict or control what happens in our lives and none of us truly gets what we deserve, thank God! But still, we’ve probably all asked at one time or another, “Why me?”, or “Why that person?” And of course, the answer is often, “We just don’t know, and we really can’t always explain why things happen the way they do.” It’s incredibly unsatisfying, it can be disconcerting, and for those of us who like to think that we do, maybe, have a bit of control over the outcomes of our lives, it’s beyond frustrating and can send us into tears and tirades – which is where we find Job in chapter 23.

One of Job’s friends, Eliphaz had just been trying to cheer him up using “proverbial wisdom”, telling him that if he would just turn back to God and own up to all the horrible things he’d obviously done, there might be a chance that God would take him back and bless him again. Job was resolute. He knew his own heart and he actually agreed with Eliphaz that God IS a just God and a reasonable and merciful God. The trouble was that Job could not find God. He knew that if he could get a hearing with God and God would just “give him his day in court”, he’d be able to convince God of his innocence, his uprightness. He would be acquitted. But God was nowhere to be found. Disappeared. Hiding. This didn’t cause Job to love God any less, but it terrified him. If God was gone what did Job have? Job declared that if God is hidden so deeply that he can’t be found, then Job wanted to be hidden that deeply too.

I imagine that if we’re honest with ourselves there might be times when we’ve felt this kind of absence from God. And that’s one of the reasons why it’s important that the book of Job is in the Bible. It lets us know that this sense of God being disappeared from us is a human sense that even righteous and faithful people like Job have had. If we haven’t experienced it ourselves, it can offer a perspective that many have felt and surely are feeling right now. Black people sitting on death row for crimes they didn’t commit. People who are so poor they can’t afford to feed their children. Innocent people caught in nightmarish wars that they neither started nor wish to continue. Surely there are many people in this world who feel the absence of God with no way to find him.

It’s kind of a shame to leave it there, but that’s where our text for today from Job ends. It’s not where the story ends though. If you’re curious, feel free to read a little further on your own – or don’t miss the next two Sundays! Luann will unpack chapter 38 next week and Julianna chapter 42 in two weeks – there’s more resolution in both of those chapters than there is in today’s.

So, briefly, what about the Gospel story that we also heard? Mark, chapter 10, is a familiar story about a wealthy man who comes to ask Jesus what he needs to *do* to inherit salvation.

Like Job, this man is sincere. He comes to Jesus humbly, on his knees. He seems to be doing his level best to live faithfully, observe the law, keep the commandments and he's asking Jesus a genuine question. Jesus looked at him and loved him. This is a heart-felt concern that Jesus has for this man. Because the man seems to truly believe that his wealth is HIS – that he's earned it, he can do as he pleases with it and it doesn't have anything to do with anybody else. The LAST thing the man expected was for Jesus to challenge how he feels about his money, and to tell him that he has to prioritize people over money.

Like everyone else in his culture, the man lived and worked under the rubric of “proverbial wisdom”. He understood life to have a certain logic about it. It was the “if/then” model. IF you live a good and righteous life, if you keep the 638 commandments, if you work hard and stay focused, THEN you'll do well. You'll earn a lot of money and then you'll have a lot of power. And that was the conventional wisdom of the time – and it's the conventional wisdom of our time.

But Jesus was heart-broken for this man, because he had everything going for him! Except just the one thing. He loved, loved, *loved* his stuff. And he had a lot of stuff. Jesus told him he had to sell and give the money to the poor. It had never occurred to this man that an inheritance, by definition, can't be earned. An inheritance is something you're given. His salvation had nothing to do with what he *could do* about it. He would need to change his life, his mind, his focus. He would have to learn how to put other people before his own disciplined righteousness. He had tried so hard and done so well. As the reality of what Jesus was saying to him began to register, his mind was blown. At first he was dismayed. Then he was sad. And then he went away. I wonder if he also felt as if God was suddenly hiding from him.

As if, with this explanation from Jesus, God had excused himself and was simply no longer part of the man's well-organized landscape. As if God had been in the predictable color on the walls and with this news, all the color had been removed and God just blended in so that the man could no longer see God clearly or feel that he had a sense of where God was.

From the ancient story of Job to the Gospel story of the rich man and into our own time, we want to know that God is here. But these stories tell us that God cannot be grasped, his grace cannot be earned, and God doesn't always play by the rules as we understand them. In these fraught times we long for God to show up, hear our case, bring justice and straighten things out! We might also feel that God is mysterious, hiding and we can't always tell exactly where God is.

Maybe these stories can maybe help us to loosen our grip, let go of some of our stuff, relinquish some of our long-held, proverbial wisdom, sit with Job in the silence of our faithfulness, even when we're suffering, and to keep asking God to hear us as we keep trying to respond to God's surprising calls.

Offering Prayer – Provider of all, we thank you for these gifts of money and for those who've given them. We thank you for all the gifts you give us – of time, talents, passions and kindness. Grant your blessing to each one here and the gifts that they offer. Amen.

Benediction – Go now, committed to your faith in our mysterious and creative God. Keep searching, even when God seems elusive. Amen.