

25 Pentecost, Proper 27, Yr. C
November 6, 2016
Job 19:23-27a; Psalm 17:1-9, Luke 20:27-38

In the story of Job and in Luke's gospel, there are a number of questions being asked. And those questions fall across a spectrum: some are what I would call speculative questions, some are more existential questions and some are ultimate questions. When I was in Dallas, I sat with a Zen group and one of the questions the Zen master, who was also a Catholic priest, would ask was about why you came. Was it simple curiosity? Or to improve your health? Or did you come because your hair was on fire? The same kind of spectrum of questions- from the superficial to the profound.

Let's look first at the Sadducees. Luke reminds us that they didn't believe in the resurrection. So their question was an attempt to force Jesus to admit how absurd the whole idea of resurrection was. And they do that by asking the question about the woman who had seven husbands. The question comes out of the tradition that said that if a man died childless, it was the obligation of his brother to take on the widow and hopefully give her a son, who would remember his biological father and care for his mother. There's apparently a gravestone in a 19th century British cemetery with a similar inscription: "Seven wives I've buried with as many a fervent prayer. If we meet in heaven, won't there be trouble there?" That husband has the same question as the Sadducees. But given the spectrum of questions I suggested, this is undoubtedly a speculative question, or one could even say that it was an opportunity for rabbis to "play" with an idea. We're familiar with that kind of speculative question – for instance the medieval question about how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. Or, more playful perhaps, in the question about how many Episcopalians it takes to change a light bulb. The answer is two: one to make the martinis and one to call the electrician. Speculative questions about the afterlife abound – like how is God going to fit all those bodies in? Or, what kind of body will I actually have, anyway (some Muslim teachers have answered this one quite definitively, by saying that we'll all have our 30-year old bodies back!) Jesus takes the question seriously, though, and in his answer says something that carries over into our analysis of the Job reading. He tells the Sadducees that God can create new orders of life where the conditions of life are far different from those we know here. God is never going to be limited by our understanding.

Hanging on to that idea, let's switch to Job. He's often called the perfect example of patience but, if you read the whole book, he's certainly not that. Perhaps endurance; or perhaps faithfulness in spite of anger; perhaps bravery in railing against God, but not patience. You undoubtedly have heard all or at least part of the story. It's not historical; it's more of a folk tale. Job was clearly a good guy. He did everything right. And he enjoyed a good life – he had a loving wife, ten children, thousands of sheep and camels and oxen and donkeys. He was respected in his community. Life was going along quite well. But then there's a conversation in heaven. And here we see some of the questions I mentioned earlier. It all starts when God asks one of his helpers, Ha-satan, (not the devil, but a kind of district attorney working for the almighty) where he's been and he says he's been walking around on the earth. And then God asks another question: "Ah, did you see my good servant Job? He's a sound and honest man

who fears God and shuns evil.” And Ha-satan replies, “Of course he does – why shouldn’t he? Everything is going so well for him.” And then HE asks a question: I wonder what would happen if he lost all that good stuff? I’m betting that he’d curse you to your face.” And God, who’s hoping that Job loves him for himself and not just for the gifts he’s received, gives permission for Job to be tested. In short order, he’s lost everything. One by one his servants come to tell him of the most recent disaster. But Job doesn’t curse God – he laments, of course, but then says, “The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”

And then God and Ha-satan have another conversation about Job. And another question. “What do you think he’d do if you afflicted his body?” And Ha-Satan does. But again, even though Job is miserable, sitting on a dung heap, scratching his sores, even though his wife tells him he should just curse God and die, Job persists – he doesn’t understand what’s happening but he retains his faith in God’s existence and God’s justice. Rather than cursing God, he curses the day he was born. At that point some friends come to commiserate with him. At first they’re silent in the face of Job’s suffering. But when they DO speak, they try to fit what’s happening to him into the conventional theology of the day. That theology said that the good are rewarded and it’s only the wicked who suffer. So they’re saying, in effect: GOD IS JUST SO YOU MUST DESERVE WHAT’S HAPPENING TO YOU. WHAT HAVE YOU DONE? But Job is clear that he HASN’T sinned and continues to protest his innocence. The psalm we chanted could have been written by Job – I’m innocent, God; search me, judge me, answer me.

And then for chapter after chapter, we hear Job’s lament, his complaints, his pleas that God should answer him, should recognize his innocence. He even suggests that there should be a trial, him against God. He’s figuratively and literally shaking his fist at God, daring God to act justly, to vindicate him. Job’s friends are horrified because he’s defying that conventional theology by which they’ve all been living. But what we hear from Job are those questions on the other end of the spectrum: those very real, existential and ultimate questions: Why this suffering? Where are you when I call on you? Are you really just? What did I do to deserve this? And if we haven’t prayed a prayer like that at some point in our lives, we surely know someone who has. But, still, in the middle of Job’s anguish and the fact that he is deserted by everyone and feels even deserted by God, we hear this morning’s verse: I KNOW THAT MY REDEEMER LIVES AND THAT AT THE LAST I SHALL SEE GOD who is a friend and not a stranger. Faith in spite of it all.

And then, after 37 chapters, God appears to Job. And God gives his answer, but gives it in the form of questions: Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations? Where were you when I laid its cornerstone to the joyful concert of the morning stars? Where were you when I blocked the sea? Have you any idea of the extent of the earth? Once again, existential and ultimate questions. Job, no doubt overwhelmed by all of this, acknowledges God’s power and his own inability to understand but still, even in his humility, rejoices that he has seen God with his own eyes. It’s a bit like the Jacob reading, when Jacob wrestled all night with God – both Jacob and Job may forever after walk with a limp but they will both be able to say that they have seen God face to face and lived.

Someone has said that when we try to discern God's ways, it's a bit like a fly walking across the ceiling of the Sistine chapel; we're always going to have a very limited perspective. Barbara Brown Taylor looks at this passage and at Job's interaction with God and says that it's as if a "flea had insisted that the lion upon which it was riding stop – *stop right now* – and explain why the ride was so bumpy and hot. The flea roared and roared as loud as it could, never expecting to be heard, much less answered, until one day the lion turned around and roared right back, so that the flea saw itself reflected in both golden eyes at once. Never mind what the lion said. The lion turned around. The lion roared back. And that is enough for anyone to live on the rest of his life."

So a final question: what does this all mean for us?

It means, I think, that we must ask those deep questions, that we must wrestle with God. It means also that we'll never totally "get it" so that we'll always have to trust God and God's faithfulness. It means that God never abandons us, even if we don't feel his presence. It means our questions and even our anger are acceptable to God. Questions, anger, confusion, struggle and yet all in the context of faith and hope and trust. And, finally it means that, in the end, in my flesh I shall see God, who is my friend and not a stranger. Who could ask for anything more? Amen.