

22 Pentecost, Proper 27, Yr. C
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Job19:23-27a, 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 and some are ultimate questions. When I was in Dallas, I sat with a Zen group that was led by a Zen master who was also a Catholic priest. When people were new to the group he would ask them a question: why did you come? Was it to improve your health? Was it simple curiosity? Or did you come because your hair was on fire? A spectrum of questions, ranging from the mundane to the profound. What about the questions we hear from the Sadducees this morning. Luke reminds us that they didn't believe in the Resurrection. So maybe their question was an attempt to force Jesus into a position where he'd be stuck defending something absurd? Hence 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 question: "Seven wives I buried with as many a fervent prayer. If we meet in heaven, won't there be trouble there?" But, given the spectrum I've suggested, this is undoubtedly a speculative question. More charitably, one could argue that, like scholastic theologians or contemporary philosophers, they were just engaging in a bit of play. Sort of like the speculation about how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. Of even more playful, there's the question about how many Episcopalians are needed to change a lightbulb. The answer is two: one to make the martinis and the other to call the electrician.

Speculative questions about the afterlife abound. We do, after all, have an abiding interest! Questions like: how will God fit all those bodies in? Or, what kind of body will I actually have – some Muslims say we'll all have our 30 year old bodies back.

Whatever the intent of the questioners, Jesus takes the question seriously. And, in his answer, he 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 conditions are far different from what we know here. God is never going to be limited by our understanding.

Hold on to that idea and switch to the Job reading. Job is often called the perfect example of patience but, if you read the whole book, he's certainly not that. Perhaps endurance or faithfulness in spite of anger and suffering, 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 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 (who, by the way is NOT the devil, but a kind of district attorney working for the almighty>) He's been walking around on the earth, he tells God. And then God asks a 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 wouldn't he? Everything is going so well for him. And then HE asks a question: Tell me, Lord, I wonder what would happen if he lost all that good stuff. I'm betting that his love for you would disappear and he'll turn and curse you to your face. " And God, who's hoping that Job loves him for himself, not 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 one disaster after another. 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."

He's passed the test. But then the Lord and Ha-Satan have another conversation. And there's another question: What do you think he'd do if you afflicted his body? And Ha-Stan does. But again, even though Job is miserable, sitting on a dung heap, scratching his sores, even though his wife tells him h should just curse God and die, Job persists – he doesn't

understand what's happening but he retains his trust in God's existence and God's justice. Rather than cursing God, he curses the very day he was born. At that point some friends come to commiserate with him. At first they are silent in the face of Job's suffering. But then they try to fit what's happening into the time-honored tradition. You must have committed some sin because everyone knows the good are blessed and only the evil are punished like this. What they are saying is: **GOD IS JUST SO YOU MUST DESERVE WHAT'S HAPPENING TO YOU. WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?** But Job is having none of it and continues to proclaim his innocence. The psalm we chanted could have been written by Job – I'm innocent, search me, judge me, answer me.

And then, 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 far end of the spectrum: those very real, existential, ultimate and anguished 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, I'm sure we know people who have. 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 and trust in spite of everything.

And then, after 37 verses, God appears to Job. And God gives his answers, but they are in the form of God's own 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 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 story of Jacob wrestling with the angel: both Jacob and Job may walk away 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, while 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 says that it's as if a "flea had insisted 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 really 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 gold eyes at one. 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 mean for us? It means, I think that we need to ask those deep questions, we need to wrestle with God. It also means that we'll never totally get it so that we'll always have to trust God and God's faithful love. It means that God never abandons us, even if the ride is bumpy and 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, final 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.