

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 23, Year B (track one)

First Reading

Job 23:1-9, 16-17 (omitted verses in italics)

Then Job answered and said:

“Today also my complaint is bitter;
my hand is heavy on account of my groaning.
Oh, that I knew where I might find him,
that I might come even to his seat!
I would lay my case before him
and fill my mouth with arguments.
I would know what he would answer me
and understand what he would say to me.
Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power?
No; he would pay attention to me.
There an upright man could argue with him,
and I would be acquitted forever by my judge.

*“Behold, I go forward, but he is not there,
and backward, but I do not perceive him;
on the left hand when he is working, I do not behold him;
he turns to the right hand, but I do not see him.
But he knows the way that I take;
when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold.
My foot has held fast to his steps;
I have kept his way and have not turned aside.
I have not departed from the commandment of his lips;
I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my portion of food.
But he is unchangeable, and who can turn him back?
What he desires, that he does.
For he will complete what he appoints for me,
and many such things are in his mind.
Therefore I am terrified at his presence;
when I consider, I am in dread of him.
God has made my heart faint;
the Almighty has terrified me;
yet I am not silenced because of the darkness,
nor because thick darkness covers my face. (ESV)*

Second Reading

Hebrews 4:12–16 (v. 1-11 added in italics for context)

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said,

*“As I swore in my wrath,
“They shall not enter my rest,”*

although his works were finished from the foundation of the world. For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: “And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.” And again in this passage he said,

“They shall not enter my rest.”

Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, again he appoints a certain day, “Today,” saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted,

*“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts.”*

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Mark 10:17–31

And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, Do

not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.” And he said to him, “Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.” And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, “You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.” Peter began to say to him, “See, we have left everything and followed you.” Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

We skipped in our readings from part of the prologue to Job, that opening prose section, all the way back to chapter 23. We have missed the calls from Job’s wife and friends to either curse God (acknowledge that God is capricious and evil) or that he, Job is guilty of some sin that has brought these calamities upon him. We have set aside an enormous part of Job’s struggle. In so doing, we may have obscured the book’s larger purpose.

And what would that purpose be? Nearly all commentators on Job will argue that the book is about the problem of evil in the world, that is, “theodicy.” That being the question of how it is that a just God allows the righteous to suffer while many of the wicked flourish. And while that question certainly plays a role in Job, I am grateful to Andrew Steinmann, whose article helped me to see that Job is about a righteous man’s struggle to maintain his faith in the midst of inexplicable suffering. (Here’s a [LINK](#) to the article if you’d like to read it.)

This may not seem a large thing to you, but it’s significant to me. The discussion of suffering is a difficult, and in my experience rather fruitless, enterprise. But to recognize in Job an exemplar of faith in the face of great calamity, that is deeply human and meaningful. As Steinmann puts it, Job’s faith is bent and even cracked by his experience, but it never breaks. This is a peg from the book on which I can hang my own faith.

Steinmann shows that Job struggles with his faith and experience in two ways. First, he insists that God’s actions don’t make sense, and that if he might just confront God (there is a metaphor here in Job of the courtroom) he could point this out, and God would relent. But he also recognizes that God does not always reward the just and punish the wicked. In this he refuses to

accept his friends' false assertion that there is a simple cause for the evil that has befallen him. In this he also rejects Satan's claim that he only has faith because of the blessings he enjoys.

In the second stage of Job's struggle Steinmann says that he seeks a more "mystical" solution to his confusion. That is, if he might only have an encounter with God, he might be enabled to understand God's mind, God's purpose in this suffering. Our reading this week falls into the first of those two struggles, as the omitted verses will attest, with its images of laying a case before a judge and making arguments. By omitting most of the second half of chapter 23, though, Job's terror and faint heart at the end are rendered confusing at best. Job's struggle to appear before a God he cannot find is the central image of this chapter, and one that I think most of us can understand.

Second Reading

"For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

How many of us have read these words as a warning of "stern judgment?" I know that I have. "Best be careful! God's word will pierce you like a sword and expose your innermost thoughts!" But what if that isn't what the author of the Letter to the Hebrews meant at all? What if this "sword" isn't an instrument of battle at all, but a scalpel used for healing?

By translating this word as "sword" we are driven toward a much more fearful understanding of this text than I now think was intended. While *machaira* is translated as a sword elsewhere in the NT, there is another word, *hromphaia*, which unambiguously means a large broadsword. *Machaira* can also refer to a shorter implement, more like a dagger, seven inches or so in length. It is also the word used in the Septuagint for the flint knife used for circumcision, on infants! Clearly *not* a broadsword. This word can describe the implement used in surgery, interestingly, a knife that has blades on both ends (double edged).

This finer knife, while not a modern scalpel, gives us a whole new way of reading these verses from Hebrews. The Word of God, *ho logos tou theou*, penetrates, discerns between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, to lay bare the heart so as to heal it. This is the image of the person coming before God "naked and exposed to the eyes of him," like a patient on a surgical table.

I'll admit it. I struggled with this way of reading it when I came up against the end of that verse. "naked and exposed to the eyes of him *to whom we must give account.*" But then I read it in the Greek. And that's not really what it says. I wish I'd read it first in the KJV, or NKJV. I really like those translations because when they add English words to make sense of a phrase in Greek that's hard to read, they put them in *italics*. So in the NKJV, this reads, "naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we *must give account.*" There's no "must give" in the original. But, because translators have been reading this *machaira* as a terrifying sword, they fill in the blanks with an equally scary image of us, standing naked and "giving account" for our lives.

What Hebrews says is, “naked and stretched out to the eyes of him before whom we... the word.” *Ho logos*. The word. Weren’t we just talking about the word of God as that which discerns? Diagnoses? Heals? And that word I translated as “before” rather than “to”. It’s just the simple preposition, *pros*. That word can mean a *lot* of things. But it can mean in a “friendly” context, “before.” It can also mean “for the purpose of.” So, it might mean in a friendly sense, we are stretched out before our surgeon, God, or it might even mean we are stretched out for the purpose of the operation (pun intended) of the word. But this phrase need not mean exposed to give an account of ourselves. I really doubt that’s what it meant at all.

Why? Because only a few verses later we’re encouraged to come and “...with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” This context is not one of terrible judgment, but one of grace and mercy to help.

And this is why I included the italicized verses before this week’s reading. Last week I discussed the likelihood that Hebrews envisions the journey of believers not as the conclusion of the Babylonian exile, as many have suggested, but as the as-yet-unrealized goal of the Exodus. The verses I included for context summon just that image. Believers are those who enjoy the “rest” that Joshua never really gave to God’s people.

And here’s the kicker. Remember when I said that in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Septuagint, *machaira* was the word used for the knife of circumcision? What did Joshua do when he summoned all the people after they’d crossed the Jordan? He circumcised all the generation of those who had crossed over. This is an image of being made fit to live in the “rest” that God promised. Paul speaks of believers as those whose *hearts* are circumcised. (Rom. 2:29) Here, Hebrews speaks of God’s word as that which operates, with a knife of circumcision, on the heart. So we are enjoined to come with confidence to find this help, to be made fit to enter into God’s rest.

Of course, I got almost all of this from a really enlightening paper by Gene R. Smillie. I am truly grateful for this much more Gospel oriented way of reading this passage, and you can find the paper for yourselves, [HERE](#).

Gospel Text

With the introduction of the rich man in 10:17 (his wealth is concealed until verse 22), Mark begins the arc of an unnamed, ideal disciple. While hardly ideal in his beginning (He is the only character in Mark to refuse Jesus’ invitation to follow!), he is nonetheless intermittently present throughout the remainder of the Gospel and especially at the tomb, when the “young man” (*neoniskos*) announces Jesus’ resurrection to the three women. This character’s career in Mark is a close, but inverse parallel to that of John the Baptizer, and points compellingly to the contrast between John’s image of the Messiah (conquering monarch) and Jesus’ embodiment (crucified/resurrected servant). See A-A’, F-F’, E’, in the chiasm below.

- A Beginning - John points to Jesus 1:4-8
- B Jesus' baptism - The splitting of the heavens,
"You are my son," 1:9-11
- C Jesus is tested in the wilderness 1:12-13
- D The parable of the sower 4:1-9
- E Raising of the young girl 5:21-43
- F The death of John the Baptist 6:14-29
- G Stilling of the second storm (exorcism of the deep) 6:45-52
- H Peter's confession 8:27-30
- I - Jesus' first passion prediction 8:31-33
- H' Transfiguration 9:2-10
- G' Exorcism of possessed boy 9:14-29
- F' Appearance of the rich (young) man 10:17-22
- E' Raising of the young man in Secret Mark
(followed Mark 10:34)
- D' Parable of the vineyard 12:1-11
- C' Jesus is tested in the temple 12:13-27
- B' Jesus dies, the temple veil is split "Truly this was God's son."
15:33-39
- A' The "post-runner" the young man, points to Jesus 16:1-8

This young, wealthy man's path serves as the narrative thread that holds together the major theme of the second half of the Gospel, which is discipleship. It begins with a man who has great possessions, and who is finally stripped of everything, even his robe in the Garden of Gethsemane (the same *neoniskos*).

And while this character's beginnings are not very auspicious, he is in keeping especially with Peter, whose departure from Jesus (You are on the side of men, not the side of God 8:33) is nonetheless coupled with an invitation to follow (Get behind me).

In the case of this wealthy man we see another manifestation of Jesus' ability to see into the hearts of those around Him when He says to him, "You lack one thing." This ability is actually demonstrated earlier in verse 19 when Jesus adds, "Do not defraud" to the list of commandments that, but for that one, come from the Decalogue. Scholars have made a number of attempts to explain that addition, but the one I find most convincing is that Jesus is making an allusion to Malachi 3:5, and God's judgment on those who "who oppress the hired worker in his wages."

In his article on this passage, Richard Hicks makes a persuasive argument that Malachi forms an important background to Mark's story of Jesus, and here, the verb translated as defraud, *apostereses*, is most commonly used in the Bible to refer to those who are wealthy denying their

just income to the poor whom they employ. This then forms the link with Malachi. (He lists innumerable other, but this is the one most important to our reading this week.)

So Jesus, confronted with this man's request to know what he must do to inherit eternal life, adds to the Decalogue the "one thing" He recognizes, even if the man before Him does not. And when Jesus tells him what he must do to deal with that "one thing," He calls him to leave aside that behavior, to repent, a theme that permeates Malachi.

Hicks goes on to suggest that the phrase "looking at him, loved him," is essentially a reference to the covenantal love in which God holds Israel in Malachi. For Hicks, it has nothing to do with individual affection. Here I will have to disagree.

In the first place, I think this is a false dichotomy between covenantal love and individual love. God speaks of Their love for Jacob in Malachi 1:2, and precisely because Jacob is both an individual and a stand in for all of Israel, God's parental love is both/and, not either/or. Then we have the strange and wonderful parallels between this young man in Mark and the Beloved Disciple in John. Jesus "loves" them both. He raises them both from the dead. (While this is not found in canonical Mark, that lost version often called "Secret Mark" includes a scene where this young man is brought back from the dead, in precisely the spot that parallels the Baptizer's death in the larger structure of Mark. You can see that in the diagram of the chiasm above.) In the conclusion of both Gospels, this beloved disciple is the one whose testimony points the community to Jesus. The young man in the tomb points the disciples to Galilee, and in John, it is said, "This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true." (John 21:24)

So, yes, I'm saying that the rich young man in our reading this week is Lazarus, just as is the Beloved Disciple in John. This wealthy man dovetails very nicely with the influential man who was known to the High Priest in John and was able to gain admittance to the Temple precincts for himself and Peter during Jesus' trial. (John 18:15-16) This is another of those tantalizing links between Mark and the Fourth Gospel that I'd love to explore more fully at some point.

But the primary point that I take away from our reading this week is that the ideal disciple is not viewed as someone who always does everything right. Even the one who walks away from Jesus and His diagnosis of the "one thing" that keeps us from following, even that person is fit to find a place in the tomb and cry, "He is Risen!"