

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 24, Year B (track one)

First Reading

Job 38:1–7, [34-41] optional verses bracketed below

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said:

“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?
Dress for action like a man;
I will question you, and you make it known to me.

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone,
when the morning stars sang together
and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

[“Can you lift up your voice to the clouds,
that a flood of waters may cover you?
Can you send forth lightnings, that they may go
and say to you, ‘Here we are’?
Who has put wisdom in the inward parts
or given understanding to the mind?
Who can number the clouds by wisdom?
Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens,
when the dust runs into a mass
and the clods stick fast together?

“Can you hunt the prey for the lion,
or satisfy the appetite of the young lions,
when they crouch in their dens
or lie in wait in their thicket?
Who provides for the raven its prey,
when its young ones cry to God for help,
and wander about for lack of food?” (ESV)

Second Reading

Hebrews 5:1–10

For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. Because of this he is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people. And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him,

“You are my Son,
today I have begotten you”;

as he says also in another place,

“You are a priest forever,
after the order of Melchizedek.”

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Mark 10:35–45

And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What do you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” And they said to him, “We are able.” And Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their

great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For also the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Along with most folks, and I suspect most of my readers, I’ve always thought of this response by God to all of Job’s complaints to be a stern one, perhaps even angry. And yet, after doing my study for this week, I have a new appreciation for the tone of God’s response, and I hear in it a gentleness that has real concern for Job’s suffering. In an article for the Journal of Biblical Literature, T. C. Ham suggests that this is in fact the tone in which it should be read.

First, God actually “answers” Job’s demand for a response. Apparently, this verb for answer, *y-y’aan*, is always used concerning those who are innocent. It is the answer God only gives to the innocent. So from the first verse, God’s response is not to one who is being reproved. Next, the fact that God answers at all is a mark of Job’s favored status in God’s eyes. Then, when God says “Who is this?” it is a phrase in Hebrew that always implies that the answer is already known. This is not, “Who are you to question?” It is a gentler, “And who do we have here?” from one who knows.

Ham goes on to point out that God does not chastise Job for darkening counsel without knowledge. God merely points this out, that this is happening. During this speech in chapter 38, God speaks of Job as “my servant” six different times. Hardly a chastisement. And here is something I found really remarkable. When God says, “Dress for action” (“Gird up your loins” in some old translations) it is followed by the particle *na*. Our translation has this as “now,” but that’s not right at all. It best translates as “please.” Where “now” might make the demand even stronger, “*na*” indicates a weak entreaty. Again we hear the gentleness of God’s request.

God goes on to ask if Job was present when the foundations of the earth were laid and similar things. When we start off assuming God’s anger, we hear that one way. When we begin to hear God’s concern for Job, for his suffering and confusion, we can hear it another. “How can you begin to understand, my child, when you and I exist on such different planes?”

Ham then goes on to show how God’s answer is not to Job’s demand that his situation be explained or justified (the bulk of the middle of the book), but rather to Job’s initial

lament in chapter three. God's emphasis in ch. 38 echoes Job's speech from chapter 3. The images of darkness and light, the emphasis on creation/birth. God's concern with Job in this speech is not putting Job in his place, but recognizing the sorrow of "my servant."

In the end, (chapter 40) Job is silent. He recognizes his inability to grasp things that are beyond him, but he is not crushed, as an angry YHWH might appear to have wanted. I am eternally grateful to T.C. Ham for showing me another way to read this closing speech of God's. Oh, and [HERE'S A LINK](#) to that great article.

Second Reading

Back on the Fifth Sunday in Lent this year, I wrote about a part of this passage from Hebrews. The second reading for that Sunday only included verses 5-10, but I'd rather not just regurgitate what I wrote then for this week. I did write about how it is I deal with the phrase that Jesus "learned obedience," so if you missed that, or it concerns you, here's a link to my take on it. ([LINK](#))

This time around I'm trying to read these verses (along with 1-4) in the context of the idea of "journey" that I talked about in the introduction to Hebrews a couple of weeks ago. You'll recall that, while many scholars see "journeying" as a theme, most view the travel as "back from Babylonian captivity," I have found an argument that is more persuasive, that is, that the author of Hebrews sees in Jesus the culmination of the Exodus. The "peace" spoken of in Hebrews is the peace promised to Joshua, but never fully realized.

Given this point of reference, the discussion of Jesus' priesthood rings all the more loudly, as no priests (aside from Melchizedek) were appointed prior to the Exodus. So comparing Jesus' timeless priesthood to that of a priest who predated even the Exodus makes sense in the context of the letter. Yes, we have taken that to have a certain doctrinal ring (the same phrase from Psalm 110 was used at my ordination and at the ordination of any Episcopal priest) but now it fits as a piece of the larger epistle rather than standing apart as something strange and wonderful.

I would like to close this little discussion of Hebrews 5 by nothing that the author does make use of Psalm 110 to describe Jesus' identity as Messiah, while Jesus Himself also used an earlier verse from Psalm 110 to confound the scribes and Pharisees concerning the Messiah's identity.

The LORD says to my Lord:
"Sit at my right hand,

until I make your enemies your footstool.” (ESV)

In Matthew we read:

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” He said to them, “How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying,

“The Lord said to my Lord,
“Sit at my right hand,
until I put your enemies under your feet””?

If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?” And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions. (Matthew 22:41–46, ESV)

Clearly, this Psalm was generally accepted to have messianic overtones, long before Christians thought it to be so.

Gospel Text

This week, instead of trying to find something interesting and (hopefully) scholarly to say about the Gospel text from Mark 10, I’m going to tell a story on myself, about a difficult and valuable lesson I learned my early years as a rector of an Episcopal church.

In the Episcopal church, the rector is granted certain authorities with regard to the operation of the church. Almost none when it comes to finances, but absolute with regard to worship and the use of the buildings. When I came to the church of which I was to be rector, though, there was one particular group in the congregation that had presumed to usurp that authority with regard to the buildings, and another person who’d done the same with worship.

I wasn’t too worried about that initially, until I found the group mistreating other parishioners with regard to the buildings, and I was blocked when I tried to initiate some (rather small, really) changes in the way we did (and paid for!) worship. Now, I hadn’t come in and started making changes willy-nilly right off the bat, but I saw over time that both these issues were truly destructive to the life of the congregation. People were being harmed by the group, and the congregation’s wishes and needs with regard to worship were being ignored by the individual.

So I acted on my “authority” as rector to fix these issues. I did it not to reclaim any lost authority, but for the good of the congregation, but in the end, that didn’t matter. In this and a few lesser matters, I acted with the authority my position granted me, hoping to set right what I’d observed over time to be harmful. In my defense, I’ll say this, that I was new to this kind of authority, and also that both my changes had worked, but only superficially. The congregation had grown accustomed to a rector who’d been there for 25 years, and who’d pretty much “quit and stayed” for the last 5-10 of those. They’d stepped in to fill the roles that he’d abdicated and grown used to it.

So when I began to act on the authority that the canons of the church granted me, things changed, but resentment grew. I could feel it, but I had no clue how to deal with it. I mean, those things had to be dealt with, right? I’d only done what I believed best for the congregation. But the cracks were forming, and deepening.

Then one year at the annual meeting, after I’d presented the “Rector’s Report”, I asked for questions and comments from the congregation. No one stood up for a bit, and then, in the awkward silence, one of my elderly ladies, a little bit of a thing, stood up and in her Alabama accent, ripped into me for my high-handedness. I stood there, stunned, as she went on for a while, then said, “Thank you.” and sat down.

There was another, longer silence. And thanks be to God, I said words I couldn’t have said ten minutes before. “You’re right, Mattie. I messed up. I didn’t know what I was doing, and I messed up. I’m not going to do things that way any more.” That was all I said, but that was all it took to break the ice and set myself and the congregation on a new path.

I won’t pretend that things got instantly better. I still struggled to figure out how to run a church from the position of “servant” rather than “rector,” and I’m sure I didn’t get it right all the time, but one thing I’m certain of. Mattie became my biggest champion for the years that I remained there.

What I learned is that, no matter how important the issue is, solving it by means of “authority” Just. Doesn’t. Work. Oh, it may solve issues in the short run, but always at the expense of the body in the long run. Leading from below isn’t just a command of Jesus, it’s the only way that works.