

Sermon "Ebb and Flow"
Kirk of St James
Sunday October 13, 2024
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I came across this story in a book, and I would like to share it with you this morning.

One afternoon a shopper at the local mall felt the need for a coffee break. She bought herself a little bag of cookies and put them in her shopping bag. She then got in line for coffee, found a place to sit at one of the crowded tables, and then taking the lid off her coffee and taking out a magazine she began to sip her coffee and read. Across the table from her a man sat reading a newspaper.

After a minute or two she reached out and took a cookie. As she did, the man seated across the table reached out and took one too. This put her off, but she did not say anything.

A few moments later she took another cookie. Once again the man did so too. Now she was getting a bit upset, but still she did not say anything.

After having a couple of sips of coffee she once again took another cookie. So did the man. She was really upset by this - especially since now only one cookie was left. Apparently, the man also realized that only one cookie was left. Before she could say anything he took it, broke it in half, offered half to her, and proceeded to eat the other half himself. Then he smiled at her and, putting the paper under his arm, rose and walked off.

Was she steamed. Her coffee break ruined, already thinking ahead of how she would tell this offense to her family, she folded her magazine, opened her shopping bag, and there discovered her own unopened bag of cookies.

It is incredibly easy to get so wrapped up in our own lives that we lose perspective. Sometimes it is all we can do keep afloat with the things we need to do to maintain our personal lives, and keep things balanced. Some days it feels almost impossible to lift our head above water level. That is why a holiday such as Thanksgiving is such a gift, it is a moment to

pause in our lives, to give thanks for what surrounds us, and celebrate. There are parts of thanksgiving that are an absolute joy, and during a year when things have gone well, and we are not facing major challenges, giving thanks feels like the easiest thing to do in the world. Then there are other years when the holiday rolls around and it is harder to find the words because we have faced loss, challenges, and moments we are not thankful for—it just depends on the year.

At first glance the book of Job is not a stellar to preach from on Thanksgiving, especially because he is at one of the lowest moments of his life with no hope of relief on the horizon. Perhaps near the end of the book when Job gets blessed beyond measure might be better for this time of year? If only it were like that. “It is difficult enough to endure the losses that Job has suffered; now added to that hardship is his growing sense that God is eluding him. We struggle along with Job as he searches in vain for the place where he can deliver his complaint, his “lawsuit” against God.” Unfortunately, that has not happened yet.

Which leaves us with an interesting piece of scripture this morning. As one author asked, “What is there for the church to say as the congregation stands between human suffering and the seeming silence of God? This lection from Job twenty three, taken from the midst of Job’s dialogue with his so-called friends, bears witness to the theological anxiety that often accompanies physical and emotion strife for persons of faith.” This is part of the complex mystery of our faith, the interaction between the Holy and the human, and also how we relate to the world around us. There are a few helpful pieces of advice we can take from Job this morning.

The first, and perhaps the easiest to do and also easiest to forget is to give thanks if you are at a place in your life where that feels possible. Often in scripture and particularly the Old Testament it is common for people to list the things they are thankful for. For beauty, for God’s presence and guidance, for the blessings they are experiencing. This Thanksgiving holiday what

things do you feel most thankful for in your life? I love autumn, the way nature knows what to do before the approaching winter. To fly south, or prepare to hibernate, for leaves to fall, and things to quiet—the details of a changing season. I am thankful for family and friends, and when my children aren't trying to hit each other. What things speak to your heart and your life?

The second thing Job teaches us about is persistence. Even if he does not feel that God is present at this time or, doing something to alleviate his suffering he holds on among the questions with a tenacity that is undeniable. He does not let go of the conviction that God will hear him and he is not afraid to wrestle with his questions—a genuine engagement of faith that refuses to let go. “Speaking the darkness of faith is a daring and faithful, act...arguing with God is an act of deep faith—deeper, perhaps, than a passive acceptance of whatever happens as God’s will, or a carefully articulated theological rationalization for why things are.” God is bigger than our questions, our anger, our fear, and our rage. God is able to withstand the bandwidth of human emotions and questions. I have sometimes heard it argued that asking questions means we do not have enough faith but, I believe the opposite to be true. Questions helps us learn about our faith, hep us growth in our beliefs, and aid us as we struggle in a world that is far from perfect. Just as Thanksgiving is an opportunity for us to give thanks it is also a time when we wrestle with the things of this world that are truly terrible.

Job’s friends responded to his pain in a way that tries to rationalize a truly horrific set of circumstances. Job had lost his home, his wealth, his children, and his health and had nothing left. His friends can only make sense of it by trying to justify it. “Surely you did something wrong Job, you just need to repent.” It is difficult sometimes to let questions linger. We want to take action, find a solution—do something to help! What Job needed most was for his friends to pull up a chair, say “I am so sorry for your deep losses, I am bearing witness to your pain, and

sitting with you in the middle of this.” Which leads to another important learning for us “followers of the way.”

God is present in suffering. God is present in the beauty of this earth--when we catch glimpses beyond the veil of this world into the perfection of the next. An even more important truth is God is also present among the worst. God is with the refugees, the lonely, those sheltering amidst the debris of war, those who do not have food, or security, those suffering injustice. If God is with us in the good, the larger truth is God is with us in the worst, sitting beside us and never letting go. Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, when living through the vilest humanity had to offer in a concentration camp during WWII wrote, “in a world of suffering, only the suffering God can help.” We are known, we are held, we are seen, by God. We also bear witness to the suffering of others in the world, and we work together for justice and resolution.

I recently read an interview with a reporter who works in active war zones, and one of the things he said caught my attention. He explained that part of what he does is bear witness. To see with open eyes what is happening, to report on it honestly and bear witness to the suffering, so that people know they are seen and heard, even amongst the worst situations possible. To bear witness, to sit in solidarity, to not try and offer glib responses, or easy answers. To hold the brokenness of the world and humanity gently—this is the friend Job needed.

Somewhere in the middle of all this is the heart of Thanksgiving. That it is indeed one part being thankful for what we have been given (acknowledging that life ebbs and flows). The other part is that together we wrestle with the brokenness of the world and do our best to respond with authenticity and genuine action. May we make the most of each day, finding something to say thank you for each day, and something you can do for the least of these, until the day, the kingdom comes. Let us live out thanksgiving together.