

Some passages of scripture are hard to hear...and just as hard to preach. Last week I dodged a bullet because, thank heavens, it was St. Francis Sunday. I pivoted and didn't use the Sunday propers, but instead used the texts designated for St. Francis.

Today's readings are challenging too. They are about our relationship with God and the focus of our lives. Do we worry about our stuff, or about the people and situations around us?

First up today we have a small portion of the story of Job. Job is devastated because he is sick, his family and all his wealth (flocks and herds) have been taken from him and he doesn't think God listens or cares about him. He's feeling very alone.

In Mark's Gospel, a man who calls Jesus a Good Teacher and kneels before Jesus is shocked to hear that it isn't enough that he has studied and obeyed the commandments all his life. He must also sell what he has and then come back and follow Jesus. The disciples aren't so thrilled to hear this either. What? Is that what you're asking us all to do? Walk away from every thing we own and all of our family?

I'd much rather preach that "God is love," not that God is MIA and demanding what we might think is just too much. I thought that "God so loved the world?" I'm not feelin' a lot of love from what we've just heard. I hear God and God's son Jesus as our taskmasters asking us to live up to impossible standards. But there is Good News here.

Today is the first of three Sundays we'll hear Job. But the passages are so short and the Book of Job is so long, that we don't really get to experience much of the text. But there is one important thing to remember about this book. This book of Job, is a work of fiction. It is a wisdom story written to make a point, but it takes 42 chapters to make that point.

We know it is fiction because nowhere else in the Bible is there a picture painted of God and Satan walking together. And in this story they decide to make a bet. WE know from the entire rest of the body of scripture that this is not how our God acts.

In the first verses of this story God says, "My servant Job is upright and blameless and will turn away from evil. Satan says, "Oh yea? I bet if you tested him and made him suffer he would crack and curse you." God says, "Game on." Humanity, God's good and holy creation, is not one that our Good Shepherd would toy with. This is fan fiction!

The book was written to counter the popular belief that everything happens for a reason. People thought in that day that if a person was good and upright in their actions they would be rewarded by God. If they were evil they would be punished by God. But the story of Job tells us that sometimes in real life the righteous are punished, and the wicked are rewarded. So, the Book of Job delves into the big question that we ask too. Why do bad things happen to good people.

Job is dealt blow after blow until he is completely beaten down. His cattle are stolen, his slaves killed. Then a great wind blows his house down on top of his family killing all of his children. Then, as if that wasn't enough, Job is then afflicted with painful sores from the top of his head to the soles of his feet. He sits naked in ashes with a potsherd to scrap his oozing skin. He is devastated. And in ancient times, and even still sometimes today, we look upon his misfortune and think, "What did he do that God decided to punish him like that".

Three of Job's friends show up. They all give long speeches in which they urge Job to repent and confess what he has done. "Clearly he is being punished by God," they think. "So, 'fess up, Job. What did you do"? Job tells them that he is a righteous man, and has always been so. There is no reason for God to punish him. Because this story is wisdom fiction and not history, we are meant to accept that Job was entirely righteous, that he had no hidden sins that he was refusing to admit. Job had done nothing wrong.

In our reading today, Job wishes he could put his case before God directly. He still has faith to believe that if he could make his case before God, that God would listen. Next week we'll hear more.

The man who approaches Jesus in our Gospel reading today is a little like Job's friends. He uses the same faulty thinking which the friends use with Job. This man assumes that God operates with a heavenly quid pro quo. If he does something good for God, the Almighty will reward him. He asks what he can DO to inherit eternal life.

Jesus looked at the man and loved him. Jesus knew that this man was all tied up with his wealth, and was focused on his stuff. He is told that his attention is on earthly things and not on heavenly grace and mercy.

It reminds me of back a decade or so ago when I was married and we had a boat. My parents had died and so we also had a condo in Sun Valley. And I kept a list of the things I had left on the boat and a list of things I had left in Sun Valley. There's nothing wrong with that inherently. I called it being organized. But I found myself spending time worrying about what I had left where and how to pack for the next trip to one place or the other. My life was

complicated by all these things, not important elements, just stuff. I don't have a boat now. I don't have a condo now. I am not more holy now. God doesn't love me more now.

"Look, Jesus," Peter says, "we've already given up so much to follow you. Dang! What more do you want from us?" We think of the disciples as poor humble men who didn't have much anyway, so they wouldn't have had to worry about giving up their stuff. But the reality for them is that they probably had thoughts much like you and I would have if Jesus were to approach us today. Sell my car and my home? Well, then where would I live and how would I drive to the store? Give away my clothes? But then what would I wear? Winter is coming. I need a good warm coat!

And Jesus will remind us as he reminded Peter. "I'm building a new community here, Peter. In this community we focus on doing the will of God. We focus on repentance." (Which meant changing the intention of our life, not reciting a list of our faults.) God wants us to be concerned about with people, relationships, ministry to each other and to the world God created.

"Then," Jesus says, "you'll find yourself with plenty of houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, fields...they just won't be the center of your life. Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men and women not fishers of things. You'll find yourself with a new reason for living." That's the Good News.