

**Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 24) – Year B – October 21, 2009**  
**Job 38:1-7, 34-41; Psalm 104:1-9, 25, 37b; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45**  
**Susan E. Wilmot**

Someone emailed a joke to me last week. It's a little story that goes something like this. God speaks to one of His most faithful servants, "I wish to grant you one wish, to reward you for your faithfulness. What will you ask of Me?" After a short pause, the man replies, "Please build a bridge to Hawaii from the U.S. mainland, so I can ride my motorbike over there anytime I want." God says, "A bridge. You want a bridge. That's way too materialistic. Totally not what I had in mind. Are you sure there isn't something you would value more along spiritual lines that I can grant you?" The man thinks for a few minutes and then says, "Yes, Lord, there is. Please grant me wisdom to understand women." There is a long silence, and the man is wondering whether God heard his request or not, when there is a thunderous sound and God speaks again from heaven, saying, "So, about that bridge...!"

We are getting to the end of the Book of Job. The lectionary has skipped the decidedly circular debates between Job and his friends, where Job protests the injustice of his suffering, and his friends maintain that he must have done something to deserve it. Job has finally appealed to God to answer his questions. The issue at hand is one that is close to the heart of every human being, and one that challenges God's justice and righteousness on behalf of all the innocent who have suffered throughout the history of the world. Despite our frequent prayers to God, it is a rare occasion indeed for any of us to get such a direct and lengthy response in person, as it were. So in tonight's lesson can rightly be amazed to have an account of part of God's response to Job. It reminds us a little of God's highly personal conversations with two other main characters from the Hebrew Scriptures, namely Abraham and Moses. But does it answer Job's and our most pressing questions about suffering, and especially about why Job, a righteous man, was singled out for such suffering? At first glance, the short answer is, "No." On deeper reflection, the best we might manage is, "Not really."

When it comes to the divine-human relationship, there is no escaping the fact that God is God, the Great I AM, and a largely unfathomable mystery to human beings. This is God, whose thoughts and actions are perfect love, justice and righteousness, and yet nothing like ours. God is so vastly beyond all that we can know or imagine within the scope of our human limitations. When it comes to getting a straight answer, God just gives Job and the rest of us more questions to consider. Who else thinks that God's response to Job is just plain annoying and completely avoids the issue? For everyone who joined me on a high horse, we need to jump down, plant our feet on *terra firma*, and get a clearer perspective. Perhaps one of the ways we can do that is to shift the focus of our response to suffering directly onto God's shoulders. The question that haunts me from this reading is not "Dear God, why does this happen?" but "Dear God, if and when this does happen, can I still trust You?"

We all have our images of God, from the benevolent and remote grandparent figure in the sky, to the awe-inspiring unknowable Creator of the universe, and everything in between. In fact, the reading impresses upon all of us just how insignificant **and** how important humanity is in the bigger scheme of things. Have you ever seen those gorgeous pictures of the earth from space? The earth often looks lightly frosted in cloud with touches of midnight blue and forest green and the clear shapes of the landmasses carved out. The pictures makes the entire continent of North America look about the size of our hands, which in a non-scientific highly exaggerated comparison would make you and I roughly the size of a molecule of water. It is about the same

comparison as God asking Job, “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” In the vastness of God’s universe not only is planet earth one small rock in a billion or more, but humanity really does propose nothing in the sight of God. Equally, can Job or any human presume to measure God’s morality or question God’s justice by our own poor standards? Job is humbled, we all are.

That is one perspective of our place in the broader canvas of God’s creation. However, I would argue that God has made the divine-human relationship as hugely important as it is small and insignificant. Just by virtue of the paradox, we get a hint that we are close to God’s truth here. There is a nearness to God that excites our hearts, because we know two things that make humanity of great interest and importance to God. The first is that God answered Job. Now as complex and difficult to understand as the answer may be, doesn’t the record of God’s word to Abraham, to Moses, to Job, to you and to me, assure us, not only of God’s presence, but also of God’s desire for relationship with all the saints, past, present and future? So *can* we trust God? Can we trust that God’s goodness and justice **will** prevail? In God’s response to Job, not only has God created the world for humanity to live in and granted us stewardship, but God speaks of His care and provision for creatures like the young lions and the ravens. And if for them, how much more for humanity, created in God’s image, who are given the gift of wisdom and understanding of mind. How much more then does God love and care for you and me, God’s creatures that He speaks to personally?

The second truth of God’s intimate relationship with humanity is spoken in flesh and blood, as well as Scripture. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, God incarnate, the Word made flesh is a living testimony to how much God loves and cares for you, for me, and for all His creatures. Jesus came to show us how humanity can reflect the real image of God, and to speak the truth of God’s unending love in His life and being, in His death and resurrection. Humanity may well have a special place in relationship with God, but we cannot forget that we are God’s creatures, not the Creator, and that God’s love extends to the whole of creation. Made in God’s image, God has granted us free will. Therefore, in our relationship with God, the implementation of God’s good will is dependent on the free response of people like you and me embracing God’s purposes as the desires of our own hearts. Like all relationships, our relationship with God is based on trust. And since God is God, there is no better place to ground our trust. Knowing God’s love, and living into God’s love as disciples of the crucified **and** risen Christ shows us that whatever we suffer in this world, God’s love and justice reigns supreme. Through God’s grace, and our faith in Christ, all things are redeemed.

So what now? How do we live with suffering whilst embracing trust in God’s good intentions for the whole of creation? God’s love and God’s gifts are no joke. Jesus is the bridge of all wisdom, knowledge, and love between humanity and God. When we seek wisdom and understanding, God will answer our prayers. It may not be an easy answer, and will probably require discernment, so that in our growth we deepen our relationship with God in Christ, and with one another. God is constantly inviting us to move across the bridge, to come nearer to His love through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Let’s walk that bridge together.

Amen.