

Sermon: Setting a High Bar

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven M. Aucella

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Based on **Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Mark 10:17-31**

We have two problematic readings to deal with today. First, we see how Job struggles with God's apparent absence, and then, in Mark, Jesus encounters a man who wants to know what he must do to inherit eternal life.

In these, we see two sides of faith: one defiant and the other perhaps arrogant. The bottom line in each is that God always gives us an opportunity for repentance.

In Job, the lectionary has skipped over most of the dialogues between Job and his friends Bildad, Zophar, and Eliphaz. In fact, in today's reading, Job is replying to Eliphaz one last time.

It is Job's hope that he will find a more present God than the one he has known so far. He's also terrified that he might not, that maybe God is not there at all, no matter where Job looks for God.

His friends have been no help at all. They blame Job for his sin while at the same time, they explain that maybe God is too much for us to understand. Earlier, Bildad said, "God will not reject a blameless person, nor take the hand of evildoers" (8:20), implying that perhaps Job is not as blameless as he thinks he is. Zophar asked, "Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty?" (11:7)

And Eliphaz said, "Is not your wickedness great? There is no end to your iniquities" (22:5). Then he reminded Job that, among other things, by *not* providing for the needy in the community, Job had essentially stripped the naked of their clothing, given no water to the weary to drink, and had withheld bread from the hungry. As a wealthy man, Job had an obligation to lift up those in need. Job's interests were only for himself, his wife, his family, and his possessions, so it's no wonder God left him.

Which brings us, of course, to Mark.

On the face of it, this is the story about a man who wants eternal life but has no idea of how to get it. "What must I *do*?"

The more I let this story seep in and the more I learned about it, the more I began to think this guy might not be as sincere or as truthful as he seems.

First, he's pursuing Jesus; he runs up to him and kneels before him. So far, so good; maybe he's disciple material. Then he calls Jesus 'Good Teacher.' He probably believes that, but a cynic might say he's looking for a compliment in return.

He doesn't get one. Only God is good, said Jesus.

Then Jesus recalled several commandments that the man should know: the ones about murder, adultery, stealing, and lying. We know all those. Then he said, "You shall not defraud." That's a new one and it comes from Malachi 3, which starts out as a warning about impending judgement and becomes a call to repentance.

The man said to Jesus, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth," which might mean he sees himself as blameless and in no need for God's grace, just like Job. Jesus glared at him and had compassion for him, and said, "You lack one thing." The one thing is concern for others, just like Job. And that's the one thing the man couldn't do, and he went away grieving.

This is the only time in Mark's Gospel that someone rejected Jesus' invitation to follow him.

Jesus said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth *and are unwilling to part with it* to enter the kingdom of God," meaning this specific man, not anyone who has wealth. Money is not the root of all evil; the *love* of money is.

The disciples, not the model students we might think they are, were perplexed. Wasn't wealth a sign of God's blessing? If not the blessed, then who can be saved? And what about us, they asked? We're far from being wealthy! Peter said, "We left everything to follow you."

You would think that they should know by now who can be saved.

We know all kinds of people. Some are poor; some are not. Some are disciples on the way; others are not. Some do more good before lunchtime than others can do in a year. It takes all kinds to make a world, right? We all struggle at times but mostly, we do what we can in terms of serving God.

Others are only in it for themselves; they do their thing and move on, leaving others to deal with the mess. We would not call them good disciples or good stewards.

What people want to do, how they want to live their lives, does not always match up well with what God calls us to do. Just because we've managed to keep one commandment doesn't mean we haven't broken all the other ones. We might still see ourselves as blameless and innocent, but Jesus might tell us, "One thing fails you."

Do we do what we do because we perceive a silent God? Do we believe that God does not know the way we take?

In Job, darkness is the boundary between life and death. The NRSV, which is our usual translation, reads, "If only I could vanish in darkness," which isn't accurate at all, so we went with the NIV translation: "Yet I am not silenced by the darkness," or, "Yet I am not cut off by the darkness" in the JPS translation. Personally, I prefer Professor Samuel Balentine's version: "But I am not *destroyed* by the darkness."

Why is this important, other than to preserve translation accuracy? After everything Job has said – that he wants to state his case before God, but he has no idea where God can be found; that the Almighty terrifies him; that his complaint is bitter – you would think that Job is about to give up. A silent God might be too much for him.

But this verse, as Balentine put it, is 'the cotter pin of defiant faith.'¹ Job will not give up.

In the very next verse, it dawns on him that God keeps time on a different schedule than humans do. The wicked might do evil by day or by night but God will eventually catch up to them.

A man named Koffi Olomide once said that "Lies come up in the elevator; the truth takes the stairs but gets here eventually."² God is Truth.

Who can be saved, the disciples asked? Those who follow the call to discipleship. Those who serve. Those who put others ahead of themselves. Those who live according to the covenant and yet still seek after God and God's grace.

A word about the camel: this is a case where a letter does make one *iota* of a difference. Some manuscripts spell the word with an epsilon: *kamēlon*. That means camel. Other manuscripts spell it with an iota: *kamilon*, and that means rope or a ship's cable. So, while a camel cannot go through the eye of a needle, neither can a thick rope.

God has set a high bar, and yet God's silence can be overwhelming. Even Jesus cried out, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" Words straight from Psalm 22.

Is God really silent? How do we know that God is present and active in our lives? It often seems as if we are on our own. This is why we have ears to hear and eyes to see, because God is always with us; we only have to be aware.

In Mark, Jesus doesn't call people because they obey the law to the letter; he calls those who see the things they lack; he calls the ones who are honest about their faults and who seek God's grace and mercy as a result.

Of course, God sets a high bar for us because God wants us to go for it, to be perfect and holy. Yet many who haven't come close – the sinners and tax collectors in every era who followed Jesus and all who repented – were and are gathered in. The good news is, in Jesus, we have someone who knows us for what we are and has compassion for us anyway.

Amen.

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¹ Balentine, Samuel E. "Job 23:1-9, 16-17." *Interpretation* 53 no. 3 (July 1999): 290–93.

² Quoted by Jason K. Stearns in *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters: The Collapse of the Congo and the Great War of Africa*. PublicAffairs, 2012.