

Sermon: Blessed by God

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven M. Aucella

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Based on **Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Mark 10:2-16**

We could talk about Job all day long, but today's question is, how does Job relate to Mark's Gospel? The lectionary put these two readings together for a reason, and while it may not be apparent now, but we hope to eventually figure out why.

Job-the-book covers a lot of theological ground. It also has repetitions and patterns, which are broken just as you begin to expect them. As we read the book, questions begin to outnumber answers pretty quickly.

In today's reading, we heard – twice – that Job was blameless and upright, a man who feared God and turned away from evil. And yet, all kinds of evil happened to Job.

It begins when the council of heavenly beings, more accurately, *the Sons of God*, presented themselves before the LORD. Included in this group was ha-satan. We've heard about him before. He becomes the prototype for Satan, Diabolos, the devil, later on in the Gospels. But in Job, ha-satan, *the Accuser* or *the Adversary*, serves as a spy who walks the Earth looking for trouble, and he reports back on all that he finds.

Now his attention is on Job, mostly because he can't believe that an upright and blameless man actually exists, because is anyone really blameless? Ha-satan believes that Job would turn against God if God wasn't protecting him – see chapter one.

In this reading, ha-satan afflicts Job with loathsome sores as a final indignity intended to break him. Job takes a piece of broken pottery to use to scrape his skin as a way to bring relief, like scratching a mosquito bite, and then he sat among the ashes, which is what you do when you're in mourning. Except Job takes it literally.

Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? *Curse* God, and die." Oddly enough, the word translated as *curse* here means *blessed* in Hebrew. Scribal error, the scholars say. It does seem to change the meaning though.

Anyway, how does this compare with what is going on in the Gospel today?

To understand this chapter in Mark, we need to understand as best we can Mark's context: as near as we can tell, he is writing outside of Israel in the late 60s in a time of great political upheaval and war; Jewish-Christians were being persecuted here and there; religious and political tensions led to family break-ups (Jesus once asked, "Who is my family?" implying that his followers were as much his family as his blood relatives); and marriages failed.

People had decisions to make too, including whether they should follow Jesus: "Am I with him or against him?" A recent example might be football cornerback Richard Sherman deciding to sign with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers: he said he made his decision after asking himself, would he rather play *with* Tom Brady or against him? Which would be the better choice?

Chapter 10 is a transitional chapter, where Jesus and his disciples leave Galilee for Judea and beyond, on their way to Jerusalem. Now they are among a mostly Gentile populace, which is good since Mark's readers are mostly Gentiles too.

Divorce in Roman, Greek, Jewish, and Christian cultures always implied remarriage. Divorce – or 'dismissal' – was allowed in the Torah, and everybody knew it. But Jesus went back to Genesis to show that marriage was part of Creation; when God joins you together, you stay joined. This is why Jesus said we needed Moses' ruling – because of the hard-hearted men among us.

The fly in the ointment was that, while divorce was okay, adultery was forbidden in the Torah, and only men could dismiss their wives. So, for the disciples only, Jesus explained a radical new teaching, saying that divorced wives had rights too. Divorce was a two-way street, despite the problem of adultery if you remarry.

What Jesus really did was to declare the absolute will of God. Divorce might be the topic but it's only a vehicle for making that point. Job also understood that God's will is absolute just as he was also certain of his own innocence, and that's the connection between the two readings.

Jesus goes on to talk about discipleship, children, and the kingdom of God.

He said, "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." A little child would enter the kingdom with unconditional acceptance.

For Jesus, children are the model for receiving the kingdom. Children belong to God's kingdom, meaning the kingdom is all-inclusive regardless of one's social status. And, like the children, Job also served God with no expectation of reward.

More than that, the kingdom does not belong to children alone but to those who make no claim to the kingdom; to those who are dependent on God; and to those who care not for rank or privilege, power or status.

What is known as proper fear, the kind Job had, means respect and reverence, in this case, for God. History is full of people who fit that description, some we know and some we've never heard of who came and went, having lived an upright and blameless life. We don't celebrate those people as we ought, unless they were very, very famous for something or other.

Then there are those who have no fear of God and who do not turn from evil; in fact, they embrace it. We think the kingdom of God is closed to those people.

When God says this is how you should live, we are often all too eager to make concessions around God's commandments. And we tend to exploit loopholes when God hasn't said anything specific for or against a particular issue. Maybe this is why ha-satan was so surprised to find an upright and blameless man. Can anyone live according to God's absolute will, even when we pray for it on a regular basis?

Today's readings are about God's will and the all-inclusive kingdom, even though these themes don't jump out at us in either reading.

Jesus calls us to follow his example. Two weeks ago, he took a little child and put it among his disciples and spoke to them of welcome. Jesus also speaks words of welcome to us even as he bids us to welcome others in his name.

Today, it is the people who bring the children to Jesus, but he must remind his disciples: these whom you would dismiss, it is to these that the kingdom of God belongs. Are we, too, reminded of those whom we often forget? This week's reading ends with Jesus blessing the little children. May we serve as blessings to those around us, especially to those we may have forgotten.

Amen.

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