

Call to Worship – Mystery: Incomprehensible

When the handbells played *How Firm a Foundation* it was a declaration of faith and trust. How firm this foundation of faith and trust in God is!

When Job voiced those words I think they became a question. *How Firm a Foundation* he wondered as he thought about the death of his children, the loss of his health, the evaporation of his wealth, and the friends who believed he was somehow responsible for all the tragedies that had come his way. He had faith; he had trusted God.

God finally responds to Job, though one might say God's answers aren't answers at all, at least not direct responses to Job's direct questions. God declares the foundations are firm and beyond Job's comprehension.

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements-- surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?"

God reminded Job that Job wasn't God. The words sound as if God has reached the end of God's rope, even as Job had reached the end of his. Human and divine frustrations meet. Job is upset because God hasn't been fair, because Job has received what he hasn't deserved. God is upset because Job doesn't know what it takes or means to be God. The whirlwind seems an appropriate image for their encounter; Job and God are caught up in misunderstanding.

There seems to be an edge in God's voice, though I suspect it depends a great deal on how one reads the passage. Sarcasm always has sharpness about it, has a bite to it. Job wasn't present when the world began and had no hand in its creation. All Job can do is gird up his loins like a man; girding up his loins like God isn't an option.

Worship isn't any single thing or act. Words and deeds of adoration, thanksgiving, confession and forgiveness are ingredients. The foundation of worship is the acknowledgement God is God and we are not God. Made in God's image we recognize we were not there when the cornerstone of creation was put in place. God is far more than a genetically engineered superhuman being; God is more than humanity drawn upon a larger piece of paper.

God is more than we can understand. God is incomparable, which ultimately makes God incomprehensible. God is a mystery.

God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform;

He plants his footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm.

Join with me as we sing together Hymn No. 73.

Mystery: Suffering

Isaiah 53:4-12 Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. ⁷ He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. ⁸ By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. ⁹ They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. ¹⁰ Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the LORD shall prosper. ¹¹ Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. ¹² Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

When I hear these words read in church I think of Jesus. On a hill far away I see an old rugged cross. When others hear these words read in synagogues they likely have different images come to mind. Isaiah's prophetic words weren't given solely so people six hundred years after his proclamation could receive and begin to understand them. His words must have meant something to his first hearers otherwise they wouldn't have been kept and treasured by the community.

The people who received their land as promise had lost their land because they failed to love God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength. The

best and brightest had been exiled; the nation was in ruins. Foreign powers claimed dominion and required adoration. The people of God felt abandoned. Their theologies were suspect. How could a great, magnificent, all-mighty God who loved this royal priesthood allow these tragedies to occur?

The prophet looked at the troubled landscape and saw beyond it. One could suffer because of sins. Job contended one could suffer though one had not sinned. The prophet came to believe suffering could be redemptive and restorative, a way to make one's way through sins. Perhaps one could suffer as a representative of the people, restoring and redeeming those whose pain was so great they could not suffer anymore. There was an ancient ritual involving a goat. The priest would place his hands upon the goat and the priest and people believed that somehow the sins of the people were symbolically transferred to the animal. Then the animal was literally run out of town and put to death. The priestly sacrificial system was based on the notion that one could offer something of one's self, of one's possession, and by that act of suffering be freed and forgiven.

Perhaps Isaiah saw a strong political leader as one who suffered on behalf of the people. Perhaps he thought of religious leaders. Perhaps he even thought of himself. Some thought he saw the nation as that collective individual where all the people have become as one suffering servant. Scholars identify this passage as one of the suffering servant poems in Isaiah. Scholars have been more certain recognizing the type of poem than they have identifying the one who is the servant.

Suffering is redemptive, the prophet declares. More than simply an outcome of suffering it seems at times, according to Isaiah's words, redemption is suffering's intent. Wounded for our transgression; crushed for our iniquities; by his bruises we are healed. Out of this anguish he will see light. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. I suppose one could say this

is the divine economy; this is the way of God. And since God is a mystery, so is redemptive suffering. Perhaps to those who have known this kind of suffering it isn't a mystery at all. Perhaps they can see the foundations of the world and somehow remember when the cornerstone of creation was put in place. But to many of us it remains a mystery.

Join me in praying for those who are hurting and in need. Perhaps we can take on a bit of their pain, a bit of their grief, a bit of their sorrow. Perhaps in prayer the mystery is not explained but deepened.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, we pray for all who struggle with grief, with pain, and with decisions that seem more than they can bear. We pray for wisdom knowing we are not wise. We pray for strength knowing we are not strong. We pray for courage knowing we are fearful. We pray for hope knowing we are filled with despair. We pray for light knowing we are in darkness. We pray for help knowing we are helpless. We pray for forgiveness knowing we are sinners. We pray for grace knowing we are not gracious. We pray to you, O God, knowing we are not God. We pray in the name of Jesus, knowing we are your children, too. Amen.

Mystery: Atonement

Hebrews 5:1-10 Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ² He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; ³ and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. ⁴ And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was. ⁵ So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"; ⁶ as he says also in another place, "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek." ⁷ ¶ In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸ Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; ⁹ and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, ¹⁰ having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Perhaps when you heard the passage one of your first thoughts was, "Who was Melchizedek?" On the surface that seems a far greater mystery than atonement. You've heard about the eternal source of salvation a great deal more than this order with righteousness imbedded in the name. *Zedek* means righteous.

Righteous is a church term, not heard all that much in the world of business or at home. I don't think government or commerce often employs the term. The church is filled with words that don't often see the light of secular day, that are bathed with stained glass hues. *Atonement* is another church term, and though it doesn't appear in the passage it is very present. Atonement is the bringing together of disparate parties, the unification of that which was divided. It is at-one-ment, making whole what was torn asunder.

The High Priest took on that task, especially on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement in the Hebrew tradition. An imperfect man would make a sacrifice on behalf of all imperfect people seeking God's grace and forgiveness. Since the high priest was not sinless his sacrifice was for himself as well as for others, which means at least some portion of what he did was self-serving though I doubt many if any saw it that way. The author of Hebrews saw Jesus as the high priest who on the day of his crucifixion offered a sacrifice on behalf of humanity.

Jesus was a distinctive high priest. Because his submission to God was complete God heard his cries and saved him from death. Jesus did die, and he was given life through the resurrection. The resurrection is his salvation and ours. Jesus learned obedience through what he suffered, and was somehow made perfect through his suffering. Perhaps in suffering his humanity and divinity could best be seen. Perhaps suffering was the way Jesus best understood what it meant to be God and be God's child.

Jesus became the source of eternal salvation for all who believe him. Though Calvary isn't mentioned, the picture is clearly drawn. Though the empty tomb isn't described, the stone has surely been rolled away. What is missing is the separation between humanity and God. What is absent is the sinfulness that divides us from the One who is the author of all life. Out of all the disparate parts of sinful humanity Jesus has prepared a way so our hearts and lives may find rest, hope, help, grace and love in God.

Perhaps others can, but for the life of me – literally and spiritually – I cannot take a sinless man, add a cross and an empty tomb and get that to equal salvation. The how and why of the atonement has perplexed those who have accepted the gift and those who have rejected it. Theories spelling out the whys and wherefores fill many books.

Ultimately atonement isn't a problem to be solved. It's a mystery to be embraced. We embrace the mystery when we give our lives to Christ. We embrace the mystery when we become immersed in it, are baptized in it. We accept the mystery when we wade in the water.

God's gonna trouble the water, the song declares, which alludes to a story told of Jesus and Jesus told about a man who needed to get into the water when currents and the hand of God disturbed the water's surface. Those who placed themselves in those waters were healed. Those who were healed didn't know exactly how or why it worked. They just wanted the mysterious waters and the mysterious God to make them whole.

Wade in the water; wade in the water, children. Wade in the water; God's gonna trouble the water.

Mystery: Servanthood

Mark 10:35-45 James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." ³⁶ And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" ³⁷ And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." ³⁸ But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" ³⁹ They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; ⁴⁰ but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." ⁴¹ When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. ⁴² So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ⁴³ But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Jesus asked the status-seeking brothers if they could undergo the suffering he was about to endure. They gave a positive response, a very quick response, probably because they had little idea of what Jesus meant. Their eyes were focused on the places of honor. Jesus told them he couldn't give them what they wanted because he wasn't in charge of the seating arrangements.

The other brothers within the band of disciples became angry when they heard of James and John's requests. Maybe one or two wished they had thought to ask Jesus, a few couldn't believe how brash the brothers were, and a few were convinced the places were already reserved for them. As anger began to rise so did Jesus' voice.

What Jesus told them and us is counter-intuitive and makes little sense in a world in which you don't fall behind to get ahead. Or if you did fall behind in

order to get ahead you wouldn't get ahead since falling behind was only a deception, a strategy for getting first in line in the first place. Being first can be a consequence of being last but it cannot be one's intention. If James and John did all they could to be last in order that they could have those seats then I am certain they'd go to the head of the line which is the rear after all.

Jesus didn't die in order to make God resurrect him. Jesus wasn't kind and compassionate, putting others ahead of himself, so he could get ahead of everyone else. Jesus didn't wash the disciples' feet so they would wash his. Jesus didn't serve others so he would be served. If that had been Jesus' intent then he got what he deserved which would take all the grace of God out of it. Jesus served others and received a surprising gift of life, love, grace and mercy. Though he told us of this gift it still comes as a surprise to us, too, for it is never what we deserve.

Jesus calls us to service not so we can receive life in all its fullness. He invites us to serve others because that's what we are called to do. In serving we experience joy, peace, agitation and suffering. In serving we are loved and hated. In serving we feel worthless and worthwhile. It kills us to serve others, and it gives us life to serve others. Sometimes our serving makes sense and we feel almost high priestly; sometimes our serving makes no sense and we feel like Job. Sometimes we want the best seats in the house, and sometimes we just want to sit down. Sometimes we feel the warm water wash our feet, and sometimes we take up the basin and towel.

I can tell you we are called to be servants, and yet I cannot tell you exactly why. Some argue life is found in serving others; ask a waitress or salesclerk and see if that's what they tell you. Few folks want to be anyone's servant, even if that anyone is God. Yet I am convinced we are called to serve, and I am convinced I cannot tell you why. If I could then it would make servanthood another strategy for getting ahead.

It is a mystery to me. Perhaps it is to you. It is a mystery I embrace. Join with me as we sing a hymn that speaks of the mystery and the invitation to make that mystery our own.

The Servant Song

Benediction

I love mystery books. I enjoy reading whodunits and trying to figure out the guilty from the innocent in the cast of characters. I want to tease out the mystery, unravel the ties that bind the various strands together. When I am done the mystery is solved. There is a great degree of satisfaction in making sense of the mystery.

God is not that kind of mystery, I have come to believe. I cannot unravel God; it is far more likely that I will become unraveled in the process. That doesn't mean I lay aside thought, intellect, heart and soul blindly embracing a God beyond my knowing. Instead, I come to God with all I am and all I have, pondering, wondering, considering all God conceals and reveals. Yet I know at the end of the day and the end of my days I will never figure God out, never fully comprehend God's ways. I see in a glass dimly, the Apostle Paul wrote, but there will come a time when I see as clearly as I am seen.

That day is yet to come, and part of the mystery to which I tenaciously cling is *that day will come*. The mystery of God is not solvable. Like the mystery of love, the mystery of God and God's love cannot be figured out; it can only be rejected or accepted and embraced, allowing the mystery and the love of God to embrace us, too. Amen.