“We are able”

A Sermon by the Rev. Rachel Wildman

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

Sunday, October 17th, 2021

Scriptures: Job 28:1-7; Mark 10:35-45

*Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They replied, “We are able.”*

[[1]](#footnote-1)As a seminarian, I took two preaching classes. Although the preaching tools and skills honed were different in the two, my particular preaching style elicited the very same response from both of my professors. Each praised me for my ability to authentically, and even gently, invite my hearers into the tender space of suffering, noting that space as holy, and liberated from pretense…and then, each boldly cautioned me not to leave folks in that place! If you take them in there, they said, you have to bring them back out!

I have found that advice incredibly sound, and have striven my hardest to follow it…But, those who put the lectionary together for today? They need to return to preaching class! They take us right into the center of suffering, and then just leave us there!

In our Old Testament reading, we hear yet another chunk of Job’s story of suffering. This time, after he has lost his livelihood, his own health, his beloved family, we hear God’s response to him—God’s speaking from the whirlwind.

I don’t know about you, but after watching Job lose thing after thing after thing, including his own family, the first time I read the book of Job, this was the moment I was waiting for! This, I imagined, would be the point at which God would explain to Job why in the world Job suffered. But…much to my immense disappointment, God doesn’t! God doesn’t explain squat. Instead, God poses a set of rhetorical questions, leaving Job square in the mystery of suffering.

In our Gospel passage, the pattern is different, but Jesus, too, leaves his disciples square in the reality of the suffering they will endure as his followers. “The cup that I drink you will drink, and the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized” he says. The sort of suffering that Jesus will undergo, they will, too…and what comes after that suffering? What “brings them back out” as my professors demanded was essential? Well…he won’t say. Instead, he gives a very vague and non-committal reply that sitting at either his right or left hand is not his to grant, but instead, is “for those for whom it has been prepared.” Huh?

Strike out number 2 in terms of finding our way back out of suffering.

So… we are left along with Job, and James, and John, square in the mystery of suffering. I am beginning to think that perhaps that is the intention of the those who put this lectionary together…Rather than bringing us back out, as my professors argued is essential, they desire to leave us here.

But…why? Why leave us in the mystery of suffering?

Well, I think because it is the deepest and most holy way of honoring the experience of suffering. Because, when we are in the depths of suffering, despite our wrenching yearnings for a reason for our suffering—a purpose—an explanation, there isn’t one. Just as for Job, all there is, is the yearning for an explanation, and the absence of one.

In addition, when we are in the depths of suffering, despite our wrenching yearnings to know what’s on the other side of that suffering—a future we can imagine ourselves into—we can’t know. Just as for the suffering James and John would undergo, all there is, is the yearning to see the future, and the frustration that we can’t.

In leaving us square in the middle of suffering without any answers, without any promises, without any diminishing of the pain that is being human, those who put today’s readings together invite us into the heart of Jesus’ ministry, and therefore, ours.

To provide quick, and often insincere, answers about why one is suffering minimizes their pain and risks communicating to them that their faith isn’t deep enough. We are followers of Jesus, whose purpose was and still is liberation for those who are in pain, those who are held down, those who are trapped, those who are ill, those who are desperately alone—those who suffer in any way...We are *Jesus’* followers, Jesus--whose mission and ministry necessarily compelled him to enter places of others’ suffering, and as a result, his own.

Therefore, as a follower of Jesus, the crux of what our scriptures today invite *me* to hone is my ability to be present, to comfort, to companion, to heal, to liberate, from the center of suffering, even as its persistence remains shrouded in infuriating mystery.

Given the readings this morning this may all seem abstract. God in a whirlwind…Jesus talking about the “cup” from which he drinks. But, it isn’t only abstract. It’s also very, very concrete…suffering is all around us, and is our very own experience, too.

It is in the tears that those of us who are grieving spill in these very pews despite trying to keep it together…

it is in the exhausting loneliness of quiet living rooms, as the isolation of pandemic continues to persist for some of us…

it is in the fear that has gripped many of us as we witness a climate emergency and the stress that results as we struggle within the reality that earth’s salvation requires the commitment of so many, many others beyond us…

it is in the pain of participating in institutions whose structures and policies are oppressive, and not yet seeing clearly what next step God’s liberating love is asking us to take…

it is in the shame of we whose brains betray us into addiction or schizophrenia or paralyzing depression…

it is in the anger and grief of we whose bodies can no longer support who we have always been…

And it is in countless concrete places beyond our beloved congregation—in the hungry holding out cups at busy intersections or in the refugees newly arriving from Afghanistan.

To liberate God’s beloved from these spaces of suffering requires that we meet one another within it. The work of God’s love made manifest in Jesus *cannot* be done from a relational distance. Entering into the space of other’s suffering, or inviting others into our own, is bound to have awkward moments. It’s bound to have moments when we don’t know what to say, or do the wrong thing. And that’s just how it is. Look at the Gospels! A thousand awkward moments unfold around Jesus.

But, these are the spaces where Jesus goes, and so to be his disciples, we must follow him there.

So, let us be courageous, and awkward, and compelled by love, and let’s take a lesson from those who put the lectionary together today, and stay for a bit in that holy space of another’s suffering, or our own. For, just like the disciples, as followers of Jesus, we *are* able.

1. This sermon was significantly informed by the commentary Workingpreacher.org, which made note that Jesus did not commit to a specific future for James and John. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)