

“Holy Questions, Holy God”  
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October 14, 2018

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Job 23:1-9, 16-17  
Mark 10:17-31

Last week in London, a certain painting sold to the highest bidder. The painting depicted a little girl, reaching for a red, heart-shaped balloon which was floating away from her. The artist, a graffiti street artist known only as “Banksy,” had first plastered this image on a wall in East London. As the highest bid came in at Sotheby’s London at \$1.4 million, the auctioneer shouted, “Going, going, gone!” and banged his gavel on the podium. At that precise moment, a hush came over the room as the newly sold painting slipped from its frame that held it, coming out the side beneath in shredded strips of canvas.

“Gotcha!” the artist seemed to be saying. After all, Banksy never cultivated his art for the wealthy to begin with. Banksy’s art and its messages seemed more for the street, for the public, for the revolution. So for the woman who had 1.4 million to bid on this painting, Banksy’s trick showed her that her new acquisition could slip away, just as easily as the red balloon in the painting floated out of the little girl’s reach. (I’m not sure what to do with the fact that now, the painting shredded painting is considered *performance art* and has doubled in value!)

Like a red balloon that floated out of a little girl’s reach, or like a valuable painting that slips through the shredder, Job-- the subject of our Hebrew Bible passage this morning-- loses what he values most in life. It simply slips out of his reach. We know nothing about the girl Banksy painted, or of the anonymous woman who paid 1.4 million for this painting.. But we do know a few things about Job. The Bible reports that Job stood out as a

model citizen and person of faith, “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.” The Bible also lets us know Job was very, very rich.

You should know that the book of Job was never meant to be read as a historical piece. Instead, is a piece of creative fiction, an allegory. Job offers the readers a way to wrestle with something we all wonder about: why do bad things happen in the world, and where is God in the midst of suffering? To set this up, the writer envisions a heavenly court where God is hanging out with the angels. Satan appears, but he is not the devil we know him to be. Instead, the Hebrew *ha-satan* translates as The Accuser. The Accuser suggests to God that Job’s faith in God is built on the condition that God has blessed Job with the good life. “Take away Job’s wealth,” The Accuser challenges, “and let’s see how much Job really loves you.” So, God takes away all of Job’s wealth. Rival tribes carry off all his sheep and camels. Not only that, they kill his servants, and a great wind strikes the house and kills off all his sons and daughters.

But instead of cursing God, Job tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell onto the ground and worshipped. “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”

It is only when God then takes Job’s health, giving loathsome sores from head to foot, and he is left in the ashes of what once was, scraping his sores with a shard of pottery, that Job starts to get grouchy with God. He curses the day of his birth. And he longs to bring his case before God and demand, “WHY?!” and, “WHERE?!” Job wants to find this heavenly court, where-- unknown to him-- God and Satan, the Accuser-- have framed Job in ways that have literally shredded his life. If only Job could find God, he says, “I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. I would learn *what he would answer me.*” Job could ask God WHY and get answers that might satisfy. But God is nowhere to be found; “if I go

forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.” Regardless of the direction, God cannot be found.

Why? Where? Each one of us has found times when we ask these questions of God. It may be with the diagnosis of a loved one’s illness or an encounter with our own life’s fragility. It may be upon witnessing the suffering of others, and the injustices of our society that seem to reward those who do not deserve it, and punish those who are simply trying to survive. As we look at images of entire communities in Florida washed away by a storm more powerful than the land has ever seen, we wonder “Why, God?” And, “Where are you, God?” Holy questions, holy God.

Let’s leave Job for a few minutes to address another questioner. In Mark’s gospel, a rich man questioned Jesus, “WHAT must I do to inherit eternal life?” I am going to call this an entry ticket question. One of the things I learned in my graduate work is that sometimes, people come to talk to a pastor about one thing. But what they really need to address-- and they may not realize it yet-- is something deeper. For instance, in a past church, I had someone come to me for pastoral care because he said he wanted to work on his prayer life. But as we talked, we realized that he was having trouble praying to God because he was so full of remorse and shame for the things he did wrong in his marriage that had ended years ago. So instead of just working on prayer, we developed a ritual that we took to the chapel, which led him through a process of confession, lament, and forgiveness. The process gave him a sense of God’s love and grace, and he began again a prayer practice.

I wonder if the rich man who questioned Jesus about *WHAT* he needed to do to inherit eternal life was really wondering, “*HOW* can I feel a more intimate connection with God?” We know his faith on paper looked pretty good. In fact, he kind of resembles Job at the beginning of his story: wealthy, and keeping all the commandments the faith asked of him.

Commentator Fred Craddock pointed out, “The man asked a big question and he got a big answer; small answers to ultimate questions are insulting.” Jesus’ suggestion to the man, “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” may have shocked and troubled the rich man. Indeed, we should all feel troubled by the phrase “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God,” for though in US standards we have both rich, poor, and in-between among us, by the world’s standards we in this room all possess enough to make it hard to squeeze through that eye of the needle.

WHAT must I do to inherit eternal life? HOW can I find deeper connection with you? Holy questions, holy God.

Jesus’ response points the rich man-- and us-- to another question: WHO. Jesus draws his questioner’s focus beyond himself, so that he can instead notice those around him, particularly the poor. These are WHO, the ones who point the way to eternal life. Today, the Roman Catholic Church will canonize the Archbishop Oscar Romero, making him a saint. Romero served in El Salvador during a time of rampant political violence being fought on the backs of the poor. His ministry began as doing the basic functions of the church, and when he was chosen as an Archbishop it was largely because he was considered by those in power as one who would stay in his lane, perform the traditional duties, and not make any waves. However, as he cared for people in his ministry, rich and poor alike, he could not help but connect the gospel message to the life of the poor. “Each time we look upon the poor, on the farmworkers who harvest the coffee, the sugarcane, or the cotton... remember, there is the face of Christ.” His message upset the wealthy, however, for they thought religious leaders should be silent in the face of politics. But Archbishop Romero insisted, “When the church hears the cry of the oppressed it *cannot help* but denounce the social structures that give rise to and

perpetuate the misery from which the cry arises.” Archbishop Romero was assassinated, while he performed the mass, because he challenged the wealth that was built upon the suffering and repression of the poor. Yet his message did not die with him; his words had enough of an eternal impact that as he is considered a saint today, he still reminds Christians to look at WHO among them might be a bearer of Jesus Christ’s image.

Our scriptures have led us to consider some important questions: Why, God? Where are you, God? What must I do, God? How can I be close to you, God? Who around me will help show me your face, God? Now, you probably have a question for me: WHEN? When, Pastor Leah, will you give us the answers to these holy questions?!

I do not want to cheapen your questions by giving an insufficient answer. Besides, my answers may not work for you as well as the answers you find. Instead, I will ask that you lean into the questions a little more. Do not be afraid to ask them, or to bring them before God. God can handle it. I believe that in asking the questions, we are investing something valuable into our relationship with God. The questions have the possibility of opening up something beautiful and rich. Many times I have heard the story of people in a relationship where things are going wrong, but nobody asks the question, “What is going on here? Are we okay?” Instead, they may ignore the problem, or try to compensate for what the other person cannot bring to their share of the relationship. And that may be okay for a while.... until it is not. Sometimes, relationships even fail because nobody bothers to ask the holy questions that can open up something healing and meaningful and powerful between the two. Sometimes, to ask the question is an act of love and faithfulness.

Holy questions, holy God. I cannot guarantee that we will always like the answers we come to with God, if we are blessed enough to find them. But I can guarantee we will be loved along the way to finding them. Before Jesus responded his answer to the rich man, Jesus looked at him, and

Mark's gospel says "*and he loved him.*" May we all feel such love from Jesus Christ as we explore our deepest questions before God. Amen.