

“Finding Our Place Among God’s Creation”

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Job 38:1-7, 34-41

Mark 10:35-45

James and John, we know, were not only disciples of Jesus. The Bible also calls them the “Sons of Zebadee;” so we know they were also brothers. My own daughter is an only child, so she always watches in fascination when her friends with brothers or sisters argue and poke at each other as they jockey for a sense of superiority, even if it is momentary. I remember my older sister Alice telling me while we ate our morning Cheerios cereal that because she is older, she is better; and because she is better, her cereal tastes sweeter than mine. “No way, I told her.” She shrugged her shoulders, and said, “you don’t have to believe me if you don’t want.” And then, while she left those words hanging, she casually got up to get her books for school, leaving her unfinished cereal bowl on the table. Naturally, my curiosity got the best of me so I slid over to her seat and tried a spoonful of her Cheerios, which to my amazement really were sweeter! It was not until I got a little older that I realized she had sprinkled sugar, a forbidden substance in our household, on top of her cereal just to cement the hierarchy of sibling awesomeness. For some siblings, they wrestle or compete physically to gain a sense of power; others jockey for parents’ attention; as for my sister and me, we did those things too, but mind games especially were the tools we used to claim the throne of sisterly power.

I imagine that the band of disciples had traveled with Jesus long enough that they all felt like siblings to one another. That probably meant first and foremost that they loved each other fiercely, as my sister and I did and still do... but it also meant they were often trying to figure out their rank in

relation to each other and Jesus, as well as in relation to the world. What child has not tried to figure out how much he or she matters in the face of what the world demands of their parents?

Jesus answers, "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. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

In other words, Jesus tells James and John that the leadership he is cultivating does not follow the Roman Empire's standards of power. Leadership in the ways of Jesus does not grant institutional status, nor does it come at the expense of those who are beneath you. In fact, true greatness modeled after Jesus involves drinking from the cup he drinks, and being baptized with his same baptism. When he speaks of these things, Jesus is alluding to his own suffering and death.

Let's be real; none of us are going to be asked to literally die for our faith. And if we were, I imagine few of us would say, "Yes, here I am Lord; send me." What does this passage say for the majority of us who long to follow Jesus faithfully, but most likely will not be called to literally lose our lives?

Marcus Borg suggested that we can see this teaching of Jesus as speaking both to those who would literally lose their lives, such as many of the early Christian martyrs. But, Borg says, the teaching also speaks metaphorically to Christians, calling for a "dying of self as the center of its own concern" and a "dying to the world as a center of security and identity." That kind of dying, Borg says, leads to *transformation*, when we lose our self-absorbed insecurities and are reborn: "the radical recentering brings about a change so sharp that it can be described as dying to an old life and being born into a new life." It happens to different people in different ways (and we don't

accomplish it--it happens to us), whether sudden or by a long journey, but it surely involves "a letting go." ¹

Jesus teaches us that discipleship is not about perpetuating an institution and its hierarchies, but about inspiring ministry. When we think about leadership in the Church, James and John's smack-down reminds us that none of us gets to enjoy a permanent seat of privilege beside Jesus. There is no hierarchy of discipleship. So that means that our leadership must be about service more than it is about power. And knowing that nobody gets a permanent seat of privilege, those who have held power in the church must then serve, preparing others for what it means to lead. That means teaching with patience and compassion, and also giving room for what a new disciple might offer that may be different to how things have always been done.

Sometimes, servant leadership will even deplete us of our lives. This is the kind of leadership that reaps dividends that do not register in the market's standards. It may look like "a costly pouring out of one's life for another, whether it be an aging parent, a difficult spouse, a special child, another member of the Christian fellowship who has unusual needs, or any person whose situation elicits neighborly service at personal cost."²

When we follow the servant-leadership Jesus models, we do not always come out looking like winners. If you have seen me play Scrabble, you know I like to win almost as much as anyone else. But I know that the way that the cultural landscape is changing how we do religion, church does not always come first in people's lives-- even among the faithful. While some may say "America first!" the truth is that in our changing global systems, it is very likely that the US will take a second or third row seat to the emerging economies in Asia. Can we possibly accept living gracefully in lower rank in the economy instead of pushing down any country that

¹ Marcus Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*

² Lamar Williamson, Jr, *Mark: An Interpretation*

threatens our position at the top? I would rather be a citizen in a country that does the morally right thing, sometimes at the expense of profit, than be a citizen in a country that disregards the values of building peace, human rights, fairness, and environmental stewardship in its race to always be first. Being first under those circumstances seems pretty lonely to me.

Yesterday, my nephew ran a race up Kennesaw Mountain in Georgia to honor fallen soldiers. As it turns out, he came in first for his age group! He also came in last, since he was the only child running in his age group. My sister posted on social media a picture of him on social media standing on the first place block, and he looked rather lonely as he gazed down at the empty second and third place blocks.

God's speech in Job tells Job, "Gird your loins like a man!" which basically means "put on your big-boy pants!" The words that follow tell Job in a sense that in God's eyes, he is not standing on the top block, but rather he is but one of a multitude of creatures sharing space in God's vast creation.

Job's complaint was that his ordered and privileged life had turned to chaos, and if you were here last week you heard the speech where Job longs to bring his case before God in some kind of holy court. But instead of answering Job's questions, God throws questions back at Job, and instead of meeting Job in a courtroom setting, God places Job in the midst of all creation. God asks Job, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? ...Who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? "Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, so that a flood of waters may cover you? Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go and say to you, "Here we are'? Who has put wisdom in the inward parts, or given understanding to the mind? ... Can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions?" We find in God's speech to Job that God's creation is wonderfully wild and free, and it is not made for humans, and it is not entirely safe for humans, as we see year after year with the devastation

that nature's storms may bring. And still, God keeps it from all going into chaos, providing checks on the balance of nature and re-establishing its order over the years. Job's participation in that beautiful, wild creation is not something he can earn, no matter how wealthy or even faithful or good he is. It is simply a grace, an unearned gift God gives Job, just as God has given the lion its prey on a given day (which turns out *not* to be such a good day for the animal that is the lion's prey).

My Old Testament professor³ liked to say, God is telling Job that God is God--and Job isn't. Put more compassionately, God's response is that all of creation-- and we can include Job in that-- is under God's watchful eye. Job must find his place as part of that creation, but Job does not get to stand at the top of it.

These verses speak a certain power in the world where we live today, when we must really wrestle with the question of how much damage may we do to the earth-- God's creation-- in the pursuit of our own comfort and financial gain? Again, this question is one of service: Are we here to *serve* God's creation, or do we *use* God's creation to serve our own needs? The second statement certainly is how we have lived since at least the time of the Industrial Revolution. And while it would be impossible to survive without using God's creation to serve our own needs to some extent, we desperately need a balance, also keeping an eye to how we might be of service to God's creation. We should do this not only because it is right, but also because we are finding that our very survival on this planet will depend upon our care for it.

Even as we add environmental disaster to our growing list of things to be anxious about, let me offer to you a way to keep a sense of balance, between serving creation and being served by creation, serving God, and being served by the Christ who gets down on his knees to wash his disciples feet. I invite you to explore the practice of humble praise. Being

³ Dr. Carol Newsome, Professor of Hebrew Bible and Scholar on Job

humble reminds us that we are not at the center of everything. While that may seem like a harsh truth, it is actually a freeing one, because it offers perspective. Sometimes the best cure for being in a funk is to go out and find a way to be of service to someone else. Offering praise gets us in the habit of naming our gratitude and discovering awe in our lives.

Just as the act of servitude puts us into a posture of humility, in those times when we are indeed *served*, we should be humble too. Whether it is the custodian who cleans our workplaces, or the earth that continues to feed us from delicious and rich abundance, we should recognize acts of service with gratitude, praise, and even awe, and be willing to turn around and serve also. In our own relationships, how we show appreciation and admiration for what the other person brings to our lives can have an enriching effect on a friendship, a marriage, or an acquaintance at church or at work. And always, always, discovering such appreciation and admiration for what God has done in our lives, and being willing to serve God, draws us into a sense of connection. We are creatures in a vast and complex creation, and though we are just specks of dust in comparison to all that is, we are cared for and we are loved. Praise God! Amen.