

“God of Great and Small”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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Job 38:1-7, 34-41
Mark 10:35-45

It feels wonderful to have the best seat, right?

It seems the prices for seats to sports games, concerts, and Broadway have gone up exponentially, thanks to the monopoly Ticketmaster has on the industry— not to mention the service charges they heap on top of the face value. And that’s just if you are lucky enough to buy before a show or game is sold out! Scalpers and even bots will buy tickets and sell them right back to Ticketmaster, at a higher price. I should invest in a set of opera glasses.

But it does feel good to have the *best* seats. Consider the feeling you get at school, when someone waves you over to the table with the popular kids, letting you know they have been saving a seat just for you. It feels good to have the best seats.

I appreciate being on a flight that boards from the middle of the plane, because when I head into my coach seats, I do not have to pass by the First Class and Business Elite seats, where they are already enjoying a glass of champagne or mug of hot cocoa, and a warm cup of nuts; they are wearing airline slippers, and unfolding the duvet blanket that has been set just for them. When my daughter was five, her grandmother— who owns a travel agency— shared her airline miles with us so that we could fly to The Philippines in business class. We tell our kid how lucky she is to even get to fly anywhere, on *any* seat for vacation, but I suspect that every flight since her Business class seat to Asia has been a bit of a let-down for her.

It feels good to have the best seats. And James and John got it in their heads that sitting beside Jesus was the best. They did not want riches. They had left their jobs and their fishing boats and their possessions, and had followed Jesus. All they wanted was a seat beside him, in whatever kind of glory they had faith

Jesus would usher in. Their request to Jesus, appoint us to sit, one at your right side and one at your left, in your glory” annoyed the other disciples, who became angry with James and John. Were they angry because James and John weren’t getting it the real point of Jesus’ teachings? Or were they angry because they *also* wanted the best seats beside Jesus, and James and John asked Jesus before they took that chance?

Even though Jesus’ ministry was not about acquiring money or political power, even though it was not about gaining comfort or privilege, James and John could not help but to see their relationship with Jesus in terms of the hierarchies of the world. And let me be clear: the Roman society which framed their culture was infused with hierarchy. If you ever get to visit Rome, you’ll see that the famous Colosseum still stands. It was built to hold 50,000 spectators, and designed to get them all into their seats within 15 minutes. Entertainment such as gladiator fights, wild animal hunts, and reenactments of sea battles brought in the masses and also distracted them from the injustices caused by the Roman Empire. But you could not pay extra to sit next to a senator if you were a humble fisherman; tickets were free, but were also rigidly defined by your social class, with the most prominent members of society at the lower levels, near the action, and the poorer classes higher. And, women were only allowed at the very highest seats. The entrances were separated, such that a slave would never pass through the same hallway as a soldier.

“You know how it is among the gentiles,” Jesus told his disciples, “those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But the way we do things is simply different. Whoever seeks to be great among you must become your servant. And whoever would be first among you, must be the slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a liberation for many.”

Some might say that Jesus wanted James and John to be less ambitious. But I don’t think that’s true. Jesus had *very high* ambitions for his ministry and for the beloved community he envisioned. He wanted to make the impossible happen. Water to wine. A couple baskets of loaves and fish to feed thousands. Literally, life after death. And so, his disciples need to be ambitious too. They need to be ambitious for compassion. Ambitious for peace. Ambitious that the last would be lifted up. They need to be ambitious in their hope for what God can do with *this*

world and our lives if we put our faith in God. But what Jesus did not need was disciples whose ambition was centered on themselves.

A Russian novelist from the 19th century, Fyodor Dostoevsky, said that “Power is given only to those who dare to lower themselves and pick it up.” He also believed that you should judge a civilization based on how it treats its prisoners. Similarly, Mahatma Gandhi once said that “A nation’s greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members.” Want to make America great? Consider how we treat the mentally ill, the poor, the elderly. Want to be pro-family? Then rather than strip people of their reproductive freedoms, offer policies that help struggling parents provide what their children need, such as affordable housing, subsidized day care and school lunches, safe neighborhoods and schools, and how about this: clean air, and oceans and lands that are not threatened by climate change but instead offer the means to sustain life for human and nonhuman creatures for millennia to come.

As Jesus reminds his disciples– and us– that we cannot put ourselves at the center of what God is doing in the world, **Job** got that reminder as well. In this famous book of the Hebrew bible, which grapples with the question of why bad things should happen to good people, Job questioned God about why he– a very faithful and righteous man– should endure the deep suffering and illness he has found. After a long silence from God, during which Job’s unhelpful friends tried to come up with bogus reasons God would allow Job’s suffering, God spoke. God answered Job’s questions, but with more questions. “Do you cause hunger to rise up in the young lions, so that they go out and hunt? Did you make the morning stars sing together at the foundations of the earth? Can you tilt the heavens so that they cause water to fall?”

God’s questions serve to remind Job that there is so much more complexity to creation and its intricacies than he can see or understand. Job is not the center of it. And once he realizes his smallness in the scope of God’s wondrous creation, his life and health and fortune is restored. Job has to be willing to be part of God’s vast design, but not the center of it.

My spouse is in Brazil for the entire month. Yesterday, I got a call from my mother-in-law. She was in a very good mood, because last month my daughter had taught her how to use Meta’s AI function to help her create travel itineraries

and brochures for the travel agency she still runs at 83 years old. “It makes my work so much easier!” she gleefully told me. “I no longer have to look up things like how far it is from one city to another, or where to find a rest stop. Meta just tells me. It is like having a personal assistant. But what I want to ask is this: *how am I supposed to thank it?*”

Me: You mean thank *Meta*?

“Yes, that is right. I want to thank Meta for making my work so much easier. How can I do that?”

Me: Well, Meta is not a person or a God. It is like a robot, and it does not need to be thanked. I did not tell her, “In fact, Meta is gathering information from you while you work so it can try to sell you things later and make money off of you. Meta should be thanking *you!*” But I did say, “If you want to give thanks, you can thank your granddaughter for teaching you how to use this helpful tool.”

She continued, “So what do I need to say to Meta when I am done asking for its help? What is the polite way to end a conversation with Meta?”

Me: You don’t need to say anything, really. But I suppose you could say, “I am done asking questions now.”

“Ah, I see...” And then she got on the phone with her very human granddaughter, to thank her for teaching her how to use AI.

AI has a vast amount of knowledge but here is what AI does not know. AI does not know the feeling of a wrinkled, arthritic hand held in the strong and smooth flesh of a young hand. AI may be able to calculate distance between rest stops in a nanosecond, but it does not know the vulnerable feeling of waiting for the next rest stop with a very full bladder. AI may even make a person feel a little less lonely. But it will not give you the feeling of connection that my mother-in-law gets from traveling with dozens of her similarly aged Filipino friends. AI can tell you who is the richest in the world, but it cannot reveal the richness of being part of a church community that cares for the elderly, welcomes the mentally ill, advocates for LGBTQ youth, feeds the hungry, turns the immigrant from stranger to friend, celebrates children in its worship life, and shows up with a casserole

and a prayer in *your* time of need. Ultimately, *AI is just a tool created by humans. It lacks the consciousness and understanding to warrant gratitude or even a polite farewell.*¹

No doubt AI will quickly become woven into our daily lives. For some of us, it already is. But we must always remember that we must re-center our relationships, on God, and on those whom God puts in our path, without putting ourselves, our technologies, our thirst for power or wealth in the way of that. We can be leaders, without putting the spotlight on ourselves.

God is a God of great things. Something as small as a leaf that changes from green, to bright orange, red, or yellow hues before dancing, swirling to the ground reveals a great truth about God: there is far more artistry and brilliance to God's world than I will ever understand. I may be able to learn about chlorophyll and photosynthesis, and how the earth's tilt from the sun might change that process. But the incredible fact that it all exists, even to begin with, simply blows my mind. I will sit back in awe and wonder at the glory and splendor God reveals each day, as well as glad delight that I get to be just the smallest piece of that. At Jesus' invitation to be a humble servant of such splendor, count me in as saying yes. If I can take my small role, at the trust of God's great plan, I choose yes.

¹ I could not help myself- the italicized words were produced through the *Google's* AI Tool, "Gemini."