

# EMBRACE THE MYSTERY

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27 June 2006*

Job 38: 1-11 - Yahweh answers Job  
Psalm 107, Part 3 (*Voices United* 832: 23-32)  
2 Corinthians 6: 1-13 - Open wide your hearts also  
Mark 4: 35-41 - Jesus stills a storm

As during many of the times Jesus was with the disciples, they didn't necessarily really get what he was trying to teach them. And this story of Jesus in the boat in the middle of the storm is an example of that. He's asleep. How much more peaceful can you get even in the midst of a storm? The disciples are terrified, and so they wake him up and he calms the storm. Now the point of the story is Jesus' words when he asks: "Why are you afraid? Don't you have any faith?" That's the point of the story, but the disciples didn't get it. They just got more terrified, they just got more scared, and they got scared of him. "Who is this that the waves obey him?" So poor Jesus wondered how he was going to explain this.

But we today don't have to be afraid of Jesus because of the power that he had. We can hear his message that says we don't need to be afraid; we need only have faith. And this is one of the contexts where it is very clear that "faith," when Jesus uses that word, does not mean "beliefs"--does not mean getting all the doctrines right. What it means is "trust." And so what we're hearing in all of today's passages is something about trusting God in the midst of the storms of life, and in the midst of times when we just don't have any control over what is happening in life. But of course we are people who have an awful strong need for control. The message is, over and over again, that what happens to us--the gifts that make our lives rich and wonderful and blessed and worthy--are not the result of something we contrived or earned or controlled. Rather they are sheer, wondrous, gracious, gifts from God.

And the Psalm expresses something right along the same vein. It is just talking in the same vein about people in a boat on the sea. The Psalmist says the seamen have been in trouble on the sea and you, God, have saved them. This is just one example of all the many miraculous and wondrous ways in which God has touched, and guided, and protected people. And so this Hebrew tradition which Jesus inherits contains story after story after story of people trusting in God and being cared for and directed and led in their lives without being in control. As a matter of fact, these are moments when the people are dramatically and decidedly not in control of what is happening; rather, they are just trusting and open-hearted to what they can't understand. It's the mystery and the wonder of life.

So we turn to the Old Testament reading, the Job reading, which takes us right into the depth of that aspect of life--that sense in which we don't get to have the kind of control we want. The idea that there is some kind of an orderly system which we can figure out and understand in life is expressed chapter after chapter after chapter in the Book of Job. And Job is a paradigm of a good person. The story writer in Job is using this extreme example of the totally good person. And to this totally good person all the most horrible things you can imagine happen. His children die, he loses his health, his home, everything. He is out on the garbage heap at the edge of town, and three of his his friends come to talk to him. What they say is all the ordinary, usual, conventional, sorts of things about how, because awful things have happened to him, he must have done something wrong. And when it comes to the end of that, God has just one thing to say to those

three friends: “None of you has spoken anything that has an inkling of truth to it at all.” God just dismisses it. Now Job, too, has been struggling to understand what is going on. So he turns to God and asks: “What sense can you make of this? How come you are treating me like this? Good things are supposed to happen to good people.” Job goes on and on for a while, and then God stops him and we have the reading that Hazel [Naslund] read. God just says “Hey, wait a minute. Were you there when I created the earth? Do you know how to make life? Do you understand how things work in the world?” His basic point is that life is far, far, far, beyond Job’s human understanding. “Stop thinking that you can figure it out with some simple little formula and anticipate what’s going to happen.”

And so God challenges Job in a way that is very similar to the way Jesus challenged the disciples when he told them they couldn’t understand, they couldn’t control, they have to trust God and not figure things out. We can’t make our lives go well by being good. And it’s important to hear how contradictory that is to conventional wisdom. That doesn’t make it untrue; it’s just that the Bible somehow sets those side by side because of course we teach our children: “Be good, and that will make your lives go well. But if you’re wicked you’re going to suffer the consequences.” These are paradoxical truths, and all you can do is set them aside one by the other. We hit a brick wall in our understanding when we come to that place and say: “Well, look, if being good doesn’t guarantee that our lives are going to turn out well, and if bad things happen to good people and, worse yet, good things happen to bad people, then why bother being good at all?”

That may be one of the most fundamental questions about righteousness and goodness of life. And the Bible grapples with it; doesn’t ignore it. Why be good at all? And the answer to that question is that we have to separate those things. How our lives turn out must be separated from how we live our lives. So you stop being good like some kind of cosmic slot machine where you put in a little coin and out comes your goodies. “I’ll be good. Okay God, give me my good fortune.” Here’s a whole human race standing around banging the darn machines that won’t work! That’s basically what Job was doing. We need to understand that the goodness in life, the way we live a good life, is its own reward. There’s a profound and a deep empowerment and peace that comes to us simply by the fact of living our lives well. That’s all by itself; it has nothing to do with good fortune, or getting rich, or getting poor, or anything like that.

And over here on the other side is the way our lives go. And that often feels like a storm, but in the midst of the storm we have Christ in our boat telling us we need only to trust in God, not our own goodness or our own righteousness or our own wisdom. When we separate those two--how we live our lives and the way our lives turn out--each one of them works.

Now we turn to this reading from Corinthians. I’ve never before read this passage so carefully. It goes through a fascinating process or sequence. Paul has obviously been challenged in some way because he speaks a little bit defensively, so we’re not putting an obstacle in someone’s way. And then he just talks about what he has been doing in his ministry, which is maybe not that easy for people who have watched him to understand. First of all he talks about what he has endured. There has been a lot of hardship in Paul’s life--afflictions, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger. It’s a quick little list, but if you explore each one of those, they make for a pretty difficult life. And that’s exactly what we hear Paul talking about--his life that has a great deal of difficulty in it. Then almost in the same breath he goes on to talk about what he has brought to that life. He talks about the virtue, the strengths he has brought and put into living that life. He speaks of purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, the power of God with the weapons of righteousness, and honour, and so on. He’s not saying his life was rosy because he’s so good. He is saying that life has a great deal of difficulty, and he has done his best. He brought the best that was in him. He brought out the virtue that was in him.

And then we have this series of contradictions. It's sort of like saying life is difficult and if we bring our best to it, it all should turn out nice, shouldn't it? No. The way it turns out is just as contradictory and paradoxical as you can imagine. He says, for example, we're treated as impostors and yet true, as unknown and yet well known, as dying and yet alive, as punished and yet not killed, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor and yet making rich, as having nothing and yet possessing everything. And so it's the same message again. It's saying: Yes, life has a great deal of difficulty, and we have a lot within us that we can bring. We can bring our best to it, and the way it turns out never makes sense. So we can't figure it out and control it like Job was trying to do. All we can do is trust as Paul did.

And what a message for all of us, but especially I think for Helen [Reed] and all the graduates whose moments in life we're celebrating today as these people head off into the ministry and into their lives and careers. You encounter the difficulties in life--that's true--and you bring your best to it all. That's all you can do. And the way it all turns out, don't ever expect it to make any sense. Just trust in God, because God is the one who leads you and cares for you.

As I was reading that first bit about the difficulties in life I was reminded of one of the great spiritual classics of our time--Scott Peck's *The Road Less Travelled*. The very first paragraph of that book, the opening paragraph, is just three words: "Life is difficult." And then Peck goes on to explain it in the second paragraph: "This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult--once we truly understand and accept it--then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters."

It's a letting go and trusting God that transforms our lives, and as I was thinking of that I wrote something of a modern psalm that expresses that for me. I'll close by reading it:

*You strip from me*

*my brownie-points attitude toward life,  
my legal-precedent, hard-logic, compliance way of talking,  
my tit-for-tat,  
scratch my back, I'll scratch yours  
expectations,  
my self-made man,  
pull yourself up by your boot-straps,  
earn-your-way  
mentality.*

*Then, standing naked,*

*stripped of all of this armour  
I cry, "What now?"  
How can I live without armour?*

*And You say again, "Be not afraid."*

*Then compassion wells up in me.*

*Courage rises in the face of all my enemies.*

*There is love, even for the unlovable.  
My choices ring with clarity.  
My loved ones tell me I've changed.  
Passion burns again.  
My heart opens to the Mystery of Life.*

*And my eyes behold Your Spirit*

*all around me  
in a welcome-home embrace.*

Transcribed and edited for publication by Sue and By Reesor