

A Tale of Two Gods

Today we hear two different tales of two different Gods.

Our Hebrew Scripture reading is from Job. We have learned that Job was a very patient man. We know that he was a devout man. We know he pledged himself to God and would not ever, EVER denounce God or use God's name in vain. Job is defined as a "man [who] was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (Job 1.1, NRSV).

Did you know that Job was a pawn in a scheme between God and Satan? It's true. The "heavenly beings" came to visit God and Satan decided to tag along as well. God asks Satan what he's been doing and we learn that Satan has been "going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it". (Job 2.2, NRSV) God then holds Job as a perfect human, one who did not sin against God, would not even raise their voice against God.

We are only assigned a small part of Chapter 1, so I'll fill in the blanks quickly. Job was blessed with a wife, seven sons and three daughters. He had 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen and 500 donkeys. He had many servants, many crops and was considered well blessed and highly favoured.

Satan replied to God that of course Job was favoured, as he'd never known sadness or evil in the world. Satan challenged God, that Job would curse God's name, given enough misery and sorrow. God accepted the challenge and Satan was told he could do anything he wished, but was not to harm Job physically.

The next day his most trusted servants came to tell him that all his livestock in one way or another had been killed. His crops had been ravaged and his children, who were all dining together, had been killed when the roof on the house they were in collapsed and killed them all.

Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshipped. He said, '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.'

In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing.

(Job 1.20-22, NRSV)

Job does not curse God after his children and livestock and crops are destroyed. Instead he says "God has given and God has taken away, blessed be God." This pleases God, but infuriates Satan. So Satan says he should be allowed to physically harm Job to make him curse God. And God goes along with this, issuing a warning that he is allowed to harm, but not kill Job.

So Satan sets to work inflicting Job with painful boils that cover every inch of his body. Job is so uncomfortable that he strips himself bare, save for a loincloth, sits in ashes and scratches himself with a piece of broken pottery.

So here is Job, blameless in God's eyes, one who could be forced to deny God with the right circumstances and for both God and Satan, Job was a pawn, one who was unaware that he was being tested.

His wife seems to understand that Job is being tested and so she tells him to curse God and get it over with, but Job refuses as he sees this trial as a test of God, and he will not speak against God or let God down in any way.

The story gets worse, with his three best friends coming to see him to ask what he did to anger God in this way. In your mid-afternoon Scripture Reading, I encourage you to read the book of Job. His three friends are, in some ways comic relief, yet in others you wonder, if Job has friends like that, he doesn't really need enemies.

We shift next to the Gospel of Mark in which Jesus is being tested by the Pharisees on whether or not divorce is contrary to the teachings of God. The Pharisees were all about following the letter of the law, they didn't put as much faith in people. They wanted to know what the law said so they could point out to anyone they felt were behaving in a way contrary to God's law.

The way we, as 21st century followers, understand marriage is very different from how marriage was understood in the 1st century and before. In Moses' time, marriage and divorce were commonplace. Yet only the man could arrange a divorce.

In Moses' time, marriages were almost always arranged, they were treated more as business transactions. A man wanting to marry would give a gift to the bride's father and if it was acceptable, she would be given to the man who would become her husband. Men often had multiple wives and even mistresses and thus, plenty of children.

Marriage was treated more like a contract than anything and thus, if a woman was found to be barren, her husband would divorce her. If a woman was caught in the act of adultery, she would be dragged to the centre of town and stoned for her infidelity. Interestingly, the man would be left behind, as the fault would land squarely on the woman's shoulder for seducing the man.

Women were granted divorce only in the case of a cheating husband, which she had to prove with witnesses. If a man stole from his wife or wife's family, she could appeal for a divorce and in some cases it would be granted, but she would then be a tarnished woman.

Certainly there was a great deal of gender inequality in the days of Moses and still in the days of Jesus...and to a certain extent, even today.

The Pharisees are looking to trip Jesus up...into saying that divorce is not the law. Jesus goes beyond what the Pharisees are asking and goes back to the laws of Moses. What Jesus does not say directly, is that love comes from God, that the laws of marriage and divorce are not from God. They are human-created rules that humanity has no business interfering in.

The first God we see is one who is complicit in using a human being as a chess piece in a very complicated game.

The second God we see is through Jesus, who reminds those who seek to challenge God, that God is above the laws of the society and the land. God is about relationships.

This is further solidified in the second part of the Gospel reading. Children, back in the day, were considered of little value or worth, if any, until they were old enough to earn their keep.

How many of us grew up with the saying "children are to be seen and not heard." Similar sort of thing.

And yet now, children are considered precious gifts, gifts which come from God. Children are nurtured, loved, protected and cherished. Yet in Jesus' day, this was not the case.

And so when the disciples were sending people away with their children, they were admonished by Jesus,

'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

(Mark 10.14-16, NRSV)

Jesus knew that children contained innocence and wisdom that was lost on adults who had grown jaded and weary of the world. Jesus knew if we embraced the innocence of children, if we dared to look at the world as they do, that the world would be a much better place.

In a couple of weeks we will be baptising a little baby girl whose parents were married at Knox, and whose grandparents were married at Knox. She will be the first baptism we have had at Knox in about seven years. And on that day she will be welcomed into the family of Knox United and Christ Church. She won't be introduced to God on that day, for God has been with her, since she was being knit together in her mother's womb.

There is the God who would tempt and test us. And there is the God who loves and cherishes us. And I believe a lot of how we see God is based on which God we worship.

There have been times when I've felt stretched and tested to a point I'm sure one more stressor will break me, And there are times when I look at the world in wide-eyed wonder, and am almost brought to tears with the beauty and the good which surrounds me.

The thing to remember is that both of these readings are examples of God.

The One who tests us,

The One who finds us wanting.

The One who answers questions with other questions.

The One who speaks in riddles.

The One who calls us to come to them.

The One who created us,

The One who sustains us.

The One who protects us.

The One who loves us unconditionally..always has, and always will.

Just like we are multi-faceted, so is our God.

Because, after all, it was God who made us this way.

Let all God's children say Amen.

AMEN!

The Reverend Andrea L. Brennan

Sermon for World Communion Sunday

3 October 2021 - Creation 4

Job 1.1, 2.1-10, Mark 10.2-16