

**THE EXPERIENCE OF AWE; MARK 10:17-31; OCTOBER 18, 2009; MUSIC MINISTRY DEDICATION/NEW MEMBERS; THOMAS H. YORTY, WPC**

Even the messiest among us likes to have a certain order. A recent *New Yorker* cartoon pictures an executive and his administrative assistant surrounded by stacks and stacks of paper – on the floor, on desk tops, everywhere. And the executive says to the assistant, “We need a better piling system.”

There is also a level at which the Bible understands the world in terms of order: moral order, moral responsibility, moral symmetry; an ‘eye for an eye,’ do unto others as you would have them do unto you, the separation at the end of time of the sheep and the goats – those who ‘did the right thing’ and those who did not.

Yet, truth be told, if life was as simple as finding a better ‘piling system’ or the Bible as simple as mastering a set of moral rules and codes then, frankly, things might get a little boring.

I’d like to suggest this morning something that we already know but seem given often to forget: that there is a whole other dimension to life and the Bible beyond order and symmetry. It is the experience of awe. Profound beauty in nature or art – especially on this day when we celebrate our music ministry. But also struggle and suffering can lead to the experience of awe – as it does in today’s readings – which offer two clear paths we can take when it comes to dealing with bewilderment and pain.

This is deeper water perhaps than we are used to or usually like to swim in. Water where you can’t see to the bottom; water that can get choppy and turbulent.

We’ve all been there: when things don’t ‘add up’; when some twist of fate or arbitrary variable throws a monkey wrench into an otherwise smoothly running relationship or orderly career or routine visit to the doctor.

Such moments are often packaged in suffering. The Old Testament reading this morning is from the Book of Job. It is Job’s response to the speech Job’s friend and theologian Eliphaz makes to Job to explain why Job is suffering so much.

Eliphaz’s orderly premise is this – God is righteous, God is fair, God gives us exactly what we deserve. All of which Job agrees with but the problem for Job is that Eliphaz’s hermetically sealed, little system neither accounts for life’s true conundrums nor for what feels, in such circumstances, a lot like God’s absence. In other words, where is God when life is painful and you need him?

You see, the puzzle for Job is that his suffering is disproportionate to the essentially good and responsible life he has lived. So he wants to make his case with God, at least to beg for mercy if not argue his unjust treatment. Yet, he says, “If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, if I turn to the right, I cannot behold him.”

Unlike Eliphaz, Job is in that deep water of life; water where you cannot see to the bottom; water that is choppy and turbulent.

Sometimes things are just inexplicable. We cannot pin down or comprehend or force our situation or God into a set of propositions that lead to a tidy conclusion.

And this is the threshold, the doorway, if you will, into this morning’s story about the rich, young ruler and Jesus.

There are some parallels between the rich, young ruler and Job. Both are righteous – that is they scrupulously observe the law.

Job's faith and devotion are infamous before the story begins, in fact, his goodness and piety are what qualify him for this test that Satan puts him to with God's permission – if you remember the plotline of the story.

And Jesus is satisfied that the man who comes to see him and claims to uphold the commandments does so. For Jesus neither contradicts the rich, young ruler nor rejects him as he does the Pharisees whose hypocrisy he is quick to point out. Rather, Mark says, he looked at the man and loved him.

Another similarity is that Job and the rich young ruler are seeking to understand themselves and their circumstances better. Job wants his day in court to plead his case because his case is so remarkably contradictory to everything his religion and faith have taught him about how God and the world work.

The rich young ruler also wants something more. You get the feeling that he has done all this – obeyed the commandments since his youth while enjoying a life of material comfort and blessing, which in his time if not ours was also a sign that God had favored his life – he has done all this but is still discontent.

Maybe he's a Wall St. executive and frankly doesn't really need another multi-million dollar bonus or plague for volunteering so much as he needs to lose himself in order to find himself. He doesn't have a clue. He's guessing and pins his hopes for joy on the prospect of earning eternal life – which as a high achiever he is utterly confident he can do.

Both of these figures hold up for us this morning. Some of us are here today with some degree of suffering in our lives, suffering that we cannot understand or explain away. And some of us are just here, waiting for something interesting to happen. Discontent. Maybe depressed or bored. And we don't have a clue about why that is so but suspect if we could find some religious goal to achieve we would find our bliss.

In Job's case and the rich, young ruler, in our case if we're suffering today or looking for something more out of life – we find ourselves, as I say, at the deep end of human experience.

Sometimes you hear the advice 'color outside the lines' or 'think and live outside the box'. What I'm saying is that if you are Job today or the rich, young ruler you are already outside the box. The question is: what next?

Now maybe you've noticed I have avoided talking about the issue of money so far which is central to the story of Jesus and the rich young man. If it weren't the tail end of a recession and if we were all Goldman Sachs employees getting our \$700,000 minimum bonus for 2009 I might have drummed a little harder on the issue of money in this story.

Not that many of us are worried about where our next meal is coming from. Indeed, most of us live a life of luxury compared to the rest of the world.

But I want to stay with this business of being in over our heads not because we've been foolish or irresponsible. To the contrary, like Job or the rich young ruler we've tried hard and done our best, yet still find ourselves caught in the dangerous and threatening currents of life.

As much as they have in common, Job and the rich young ruler are profoundly different because they make diametrically opposed responses to their encounters with God.

By the end of the story, Job accepts his fate. But more than that he also acknowledges, for the first time, that God is beyond his imagining. Nothing can equip him to penetrate the mysteries of God's being, the grandeur of creation, the splendor of human existence. He surrenders himself to the unfathomability of this God who cannot be pinned down.

This is no 'happily-ever-after' ending but the promise that to those who are willing to let their old definitions of God die when those definitions become absolute and airtight, to them God gives new life.

But the rich young ruler rather than letting himself, like Job, experience the deep end of life, scurries for shallow waters.

Having heard Jesus' analysis that he lacked one thing – and the invitation to go and sell all that he owned, give it to the poor, then to follow – this the rich young ruler goes 'away sorrowfully' for he could not bring himself to part not only with his possessions but what his possessions represent, namely his comfortable, controlled, and orderly existence, if not his superior status.

Sooner or later, we are faced with the choice either to surrender ourselves and our circumstances to God like Job or to keep ourselves and our circumstances confined to the convenient and controlled quid pro quos we've worked out to justify our place in the world like the rich man.

One leads to joyful and abundant life. The other to suffocation, cynicism and death. Studies say those who are addicted have to bottom out, not once but on average seven times, before making radical change. That might be a fair comparison to how we grow or not in faith.

The rich man's drugs are, of course, his possessions. He precludes himself from the experience of awe because he cannot look beyond himself long enough to behold the presence of God anywhere but in his own blessings which he takes most of the credit for anyway.

Certainly a God who invites struggle, uncertainty and surrender is foreign to him. This is a spiritual language he has yet to learn or even try to speak.

The stakes are high once we get to adulthood, sustaining a marriage or partnership over a lifetime, raising a family, the challenges of parenting, managing a career.

The consequences of 'going sorrowfully away' because we are unwilling to look more deeply at ourselves or trust the providence of God and testimony of others can be the difference between life and death.

Not to mention that for more than a few, life isn't so generous as to allow repeated occasions to make the right decision. I can't tell you how many times I have seen this in my own life and in the lives of the congregations I have served. It is a fascination to me that we cannot force or control anyone to "see the light." Even Jesus stood by while the rich, young ruler walked sorrowfully away, unable to say or do anything that would change the man's mind.

Inevitably through suffering and pain, our lives are opened to God's mystery and awe. Some event or flood knocks down the props that held us up and sweeps us out to the deep.

I wonder if that's not where we are; not only as individuals but as a congregation. The tidal wave of a \$200,000 or 20% of our annual budget deficit washed over us last year. We responded bravely and intelligently. We made painful cutbacks attempting to preserve our core ministries of worship and music, mission, and youth and education.

The question now is will we head for the side of the pool to keep treading water or will we try something new; like becoming more missional, deepening our relationships around our core values and life struggles, bringing our friends to church not for an aesthetic experience but because they too might find the bread of life here, and, yes, giving our financial resources from the heart. Amen.