

## Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Proper 7 – Year B

**RCL Readings**<sup>1</sup> – Job 38:1-11; Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32; II Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41

**ACNA Readings** – Job 38:1-18; Psalm 107:1-32; II Corinthians 5:14-21; Mark 4:35-5:20

**Seasonal Introduction.** The Christian calendar revolves around two principal feasts: Christmas (involving Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany) and Easter (involving Lent, Easter, and Pentecost). Then there is a large section in the middle called ordinary time. This season often focuses on the growth of the Church, ending in a season known as Kingdome tide which concludes with the feast of Christ the king. During this time we read and hear the bulk of the teachings of Jesus in relation to the kingdom of heaven and how we are called to live as disciples of the Messiah.<sup>2</sup>

**Common Theme.** Storms and struggles against the sea are common images in the lectionary this week. Life is rarely a tranquil journey or a calm voyage. Instead, life is usually full of storms. Storms can be character building or, potentially, faith shattering. In our readings we see God speaking within them, ruling over them, rescuing people from them and commanding them to cease. Sometimes storms are necessary for God to get our attention and help us to see or hear clearly from the Lord. When the outcome of something that we are going through is unsure, be that an event, a struggle, or a trial, then a horrible feeling of uncertainty can come upon us—a feeling of fear. Trusting in God is often easier when times are good. But when times are difficult then it is even more important for us to trust in God. Our lectionary readings this week highlight that it is during the difficult times that our trust should be in the certainty of God.

**Hebraic Context.** Every religion, including atheism, has its own way of explaining human suffering and the existence of evil. The Hebrew Scriptures describe God as supremely powerful. He is creator, sustainer, benevolent, king, redeemer, law-giver and so much more. The problem of evil and God's sovereignty is then straightforward but deeply challenging: why does the all powerful, divine King allow evil and suffering in His universe?<sup>2</sup>

Rabbi Hanina is attributed as saying, "everything is in the hands of Heaven, except for fear of Heaven." Meaning that Man has free will to serve God or not, but the Lord remains king and sovereign over everything else. (Berakhot 33b.23) He continues by quoting Deuteronomy 10:12, "And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways, to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul." He concludes by stating, "The Lord asks man to perform these matters because ultimately, the choice is in his hands."

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<sup>1</sup> Alternate RCL Readings: I Samuel 17:1a, 4-11, 19-23, 32-39; Psalm 9:9-20 or I Samuel 17:57-18:5, 18:10-16; Psalm 133

<sup>2</sup> For atheists, one major issue is that, in a world view that is not bound by any absolute truths, how can we define something as evil? And yet, even atheists still recognize that there must be some things that are evil.

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The Scriptures do not attempt to justify God's allowance of evil. This does not mean that the Bible has nothing to say on the subject, actually the reverse. The Scriptures show how bad evil and sin can be and the Judeo Christian tradition finds the origin of evil beginning with the first sin in the Garden of Eden. The Scriptures also speak of the power of God. Rabbi Hanina's comment aligns with that mystery.

Our question for today, perhaps, shouldn't be "What is God's response?" But "What will be our response to suffering?" In the book of Job, we are reminded that there is a dimension of reality that we are not always made aware of. The first two chapters of God and Satan's interaction in heaven were never revealed to Job (nor would it necessarily have been comforting to him had he known). When the Lord finally spoke to Job and his companions in the last chapters of Job, He did not provide an explanation for His actions but reminded Job that He is sovereign. In the gospel of Mark there is no explanation for why Jesus sent his disciples across the Galilee when it seemed to put them in danger. The Gospel simply reminds us that Jesus did respond by showing His disciples mercy when they called to Him and calmed the storm.

**Job 38:1-11.**<sup>3</sup> Job is an interesting character in the Bible. He is not Jewish, nor is he an Israelite. According to the book itself he lived in the land of Uz and not in Canaan.<sup>4</sup> Ezekiel 14:14 describes Job, along with Noah and Daniel, as one of the three ancient men of renown.

Throughout the text the character of Job is aware of the Lord, who calls him His servant. Without having obvious access to the Torah and the commandments, Job offered sacrifices for the sins of his children. This is an interesting insight into the Gentile world and the nature of sin and the desire or need for atonement. In Job 38, God, who has not spoken since Job 2, comes to address Job from the midst of the storm. The word *סַעַר* *sa'ar* can also be translated as "whirlwind"; it is a world of chaos.<sup>5</sup>

God's appearance in a storm before Job may have caused some extra consternation as Job's children had been slain by a mighty wind in 1:19. Job had suffered much already and God came

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<sup>3</sup> ACNA Reading: Job 38:1-18

<sup>4</sup> The book of Job was placed in the Wisdom literature and assigned right before Psalms (in the Catholic tradition) and right after Proverbs (in the Jewish tradition). It is not placed among the historical writings. We neither know the location (the land of Uz is often considered to be in Jordan or Syria but the internal and Biblical evidence is insufficient to pinpoint a location) nor the period in which Job lived.

Job is often called the 'everyman' in Jewish exegesis. That is, he is a representation of all humanity. His very lack of ethnic identity or place in time is a redeeming quality. The suffering of Job speaks into the life and heart of everyone.

<sup>5</sup> The natural elements of the world, particularly places like the sea, the wind, and the deserts, were places that man could not control. These were places of chaos and death. However, God made it clear through His appearance and speech in Job 38-41 that they could be controlled and had been—but only by Him.

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to him, not in a quiet and compassionate way, but in tempest, chaos, and glory.<sup>6</sup> What is the meaning of this? One of the issues of the book concerns the suffering of the righteous and the question of why God permits evil. However, as God spoke from the storm, nowhere does he explain the meaning of suffering. Instead, what we discover is simply and certainly that God is in control of the chaos—God created all the order that is in the world but He can, and does, still appear in the whirlwind.

Perhaps that is the point and the truth that we all need after all. Verses 8-11 describe God as “shutting up” or “hedging in” the sea. Here we see that God confines the waters of chaos, giving them boundaries that they may not cross over. This is possibly a reference to God's actions with the waters during creation. What God revealed to Job from the midst of the storm is that he is creator and sustainer—there are limits and God set them even before anything else was created.

**Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32.**<sup>7</sup> The opening verses of this psalm describe the return of God's people from the diaspora. Thanks and praise are offered to the Lord for His goodness, seen through the redemption and ingathering of the exiles. The nature of the exile itself appears global in scale as the exiles are gathered from all points of the compass.<sup>8</sup>

The cause of the wanderings, diaspora, or exile is different in each of four scenarios in Psalm 107. In Psalm 107:23-32, the people seem to be acting as traders. The seas rose and fell as the

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<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew term, סער (sa'ar), whirlwind is not simply a natural storm. Ezekiel 1:4-28 places the throne of the LORD in direct connection to this whirlwind. From this throne, the glory of the LORD forces those who see and hear the voice of God to fall on their faces.

It is from this whirlwind that either direct blessings or curses come from God. Elijah was taken up to heaven in the whirlwind (II Kings 2:1, 11) and Israel will watch as God carries away the chaff (Israel's enemies) with a great tempest (Isaiah 29:5-6, 41:16; Amos 1:13-15; Zechariah 9:12-15) but the whirlwind will also destroy the crops and carefully built up lives of Israel should they rebel (Isaiah 40:24, Jeremiah 23:19; Ezekiel 13:10-14; and even Jonah 1:4, 12).

<sup>7</sup> ACNA Reading: Psalm 107:1-32

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 107 gives no information on which exile the redeemed of the LORD will return from. Instead, the Psalmist described four scenarios that Israel went through in their history, often in trouble—sometimes due to circumstances and sometimes due to sin. In each of these scenarios Israel called out to God, He saved them, and they were to give Him thanks! All of these times of Israel crying out to God and Him listening would be encouraging for those in exile. Psalm 107:2-3 specifically mentions that God would gather His redeemed people from every direction.

The four scenarios may reference the four cardinal direction God would bring the redeemed of the LORD back to the promised land: Psalm 107:4-9, wandering through the desert to the south; 10-16, in bondage and enslavement to the north (as Assyria and Babylon were often spoken of); 17-22 seems to refer to Numbers 21:4-9 in vs 18 to the east (around the land of Edom); 23-32, which is our reading this week, likely refers to the west, although Psalm 107:29 is also often connected to Mark 4:35-41.

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ships were caught in a tempest, not because of rebellion or foolishness, but to see the deeds of the LORD, His wondrous works in the deep.<sup>9</sup> As such, this Psalm became popular among sailors.

The sea has never been something humans could control, but Psalm 107:25 makes it clear that God does control the wind and the waves. The sailors were tossed about, “like drunken men” and could do nothing on their own. However, they could cry out to God and the LORD delivered them. While Mark does not make a linguistic connection to the Septuagint of Psalm 107:29 and it is likely talking about the Mediterranean (or even the southern port towards the Red Sea), this has obvious connections to Jesus in Mark 4, where He calmed the storm by the words “Be still.”

The storm may be formed by God even, “For He commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea.” The disciples certainly saw “the deeds of the LORD, His wondrous works in the deep”. The psalm reminds us that God is in control of everything, even the dangerous things that are in our lives. The good news is that He is listening to His people and rescues them when they are in distress and cry to Him.

**II Corinthians 6:1-13.** Paul, in the midst of a strong statement about the work of God through the Messiah in II Corinthians 5:18-19, saw himself as a partner in the ministry of reconciliation. In II Corinthians 6:2, Paul quoted Isaiah 49:8. While orthodox Christianity understands Isaiah 49 to be about the servant, namely the Messiah, the chosen one will bring a time of favor and salvation as well as faithfulness to His covenant and a promised return to the land.

Paul boldly proclaimed that, “now is the favourable time, now is the day of salvation.” Isaiah wasn't just about the servant, those who are bound would also return from the north, the west and from the land of Sinim.<sup>10</sup> But Paul understood that His joining in the ministry included great suffering, as seen in II Corinthians 4. But it would also include the fruit of the Spirit.

Sometimes the truth and hope of the gospel are seen through a believer's response to suffering and opposition. When something is bad, there is something good there, too. As Paul says, “Unknown, and yet known... sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.” Despite the troubles faced by the Corinthian community, the time of favour is still right now!

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<sup>9</sup> Psalm 107:11 states clearly that the cause of expulsion from the land of Israel was for having “rebelled against the words of God and spurned the counsel of the Most High.” Psalm 107:17 also indicates there was sin involved, “Some were fools through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities suffered affliction.” However, neither Psalm 107:4-5 nor Psalm 107:23-24 indicates any wrongdoing by God's redeemed, though they still go through difficult trials and must call out to God.

<sup>10</sup> Sinim is an unknown location. Most scholars assume it must be either east or south, often either China (朮) or Egypt (Ezekiel 30:6).

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**Mark 4:35-41.** “Why are you so afraid?” In Jewish tradition, you teach by asking questions. The power of God over water is seen to be connected from the beginning as “the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” The Psalms declare God’s dominion over the waters, floods, storms, and seas. Jewish people would recall water events where God intervened in human affairs, such as the Red Sea parting during the Exodus and the story of Jonah, in which the raging sea calmed after Jonah was pushed into it only to be swallowed by a fish. Both are stories of hope and redemption—Exodus for the Jewish people and Jonah for the Gentiles of Nineveh.

The incident of the ‘calming of the storm’ is well known and found in all three of the synoptic gospels. The narrative began with the disciples entering the boat at the command of Jesus, who sent them on this journey across the lake of Galilee. Jesus was in control and had the disciples exactly where he wanted them. A chaotic, furious storm of unknown origin appeared, but the Gospel passage does not imply the storm is demonic or unnatural in any fashion. Nonetheless, the boat was in serious danger and the disciples, some of whom were experienced fishermen, were very concerned.

Jesus was asleep through all this. The storm has not woken him—not the waves crashing over the boat, nor the struggles of the disciples against the storm. What woke him was the cries of distress from the disciples.

Jesus gave a demonstration of His power, and not just the power of a miracle—God has dominion over the waters and Jesus subtly showed His divine nature. But it wasn’t just about His power. Jesus did not perform superfluous acts of power for the fun of it, and this miracle of calming the storm was not simply to amaze the disciples. Jesus woke when His disciples came to Him in fear and distress and He turned and rebuked the storm. God hears us in our fear.

The sacred history displayed in the Bible reveals to us that God is in control of all things, and He is the only certain thing in an uncertain world. The question remains for us, if we believe in God and know He is in control, why do doubts descend upon us in times of distress? Jesus asked this of his disciples. This was not a rebuke of the disciples—the rebuke was to the storm.

Jesus did not give a sermon about the relationship between fear and faith, nor about His power over nature as a sign of His divine nature. We learn again from this story that even though we might be afraid, we actually have nothing to fear. Even though we sometimes have doubts, our faith can be certain in the certainty and sovereignty of God. We can be assured that when calling out to the Lord He will hear and rescue us in our distress. It’s His character—He is good and He is always faithful.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The story that followed, in Mark 5:1-20 (in the ACNA reading), continues to show who Jesus was. Demons and demon-possessed people can be terrifying, however, Legion could only fall down before

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**Hebraic Perspective.** According to the Oxford dictionary the word righteousness is defined as, “the quality or state of being morally correct and justifiable.” Unfortunately, words can lose certain meanings in different languages, cultures, and times. If righteousness is defined as “morally correct and justifiable” none of us could think of this characteristic being within ourselves and that righteousness is actually only a characteristic of the Lord. After all, “no one is righteous, no not one” and, “all our righteousness is like filthy rags”.

So how is it that Paul can claim in 2 Corinthians 5:21 that we become the righteousness of God? In Greek the word righteousness is δικαιοσύνη *dikaïosynē*.<sup>12</sup> Underlying the Greek text is a Hebrew context where the word righteousness is תְּדָאָה *tzedaka*. תְּדָאָה has several different meanings as we shall see shortly.

In several places, Israel is called to remember the righteousness, or righteous acts, of God. Judges 5:11 recalls the righteousness of God in battle against Israel's enemies while Micah 6:5 recalls that God acted in righteousness when he poured out his anger on Israel when they committed adultery. Micah continues in 7:9 in looking for God's righteousness when He redeems the despised from darkness. On the one hand, here is something of the justice of God but, on the other hand, also of the saving acts of God.<sup>13</sup>

Malachi makes a strong statement, equating the righteous with the one who serves God, “Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous (צַדִּיק) and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him.” So what does practicing righteousness look like? Deuteronomy 6:25 states, “It will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the LORD our God.”

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Jesus and declare Him as the Son of the Most High God. But again, it wasn't just about the power. Jewish scholars of the 2nd Temple period had noted that God acted in mercy: clothing the naked (Adam and Eve), visiting the sick and consoling those who mourn (Abraham), burying the dead (Moses) along with other things such as feeding the hungry (Elijah and Elisha), providing hospitality, visiting those in prison (Joseph), etc.

God's people were to act with mercy even as God acted in mercy (see *Sotah* 14a.4 along with Matthew 25:31-46). While we often read of Jesus serving the sick, feeding the hungry, and even consoling those who mourn and visiting those in prison, this is the only instance we see where Jesus clothed the naked. Once again showing that He acted in mercy as He followed in the example of His father.

<sup>12</sup> Strabo, in *Geography* 16.2.36, states that, in the religion of Moses, “those who practiced temperance and justice (δικαιοσύνης), and none else, might expect good, or some gift or sign from the God, from time to time.” H.C. Hamilton and W. Falconer consistently translated δικαιοσύνης as justice or “rectitude of conduct” in their translation of Strabo's *Geography*.

<sup>13</sup> Righteousness and justice are paired throughout the Scriptures, starting in Genesis 18:19 along with Deuteronomy 33:21; I Kings 10:9; I Chronicles 18:14; II Chronicles 9:8; Job 37:23; Psalm 33:5, 99:4, 103:6, 106:31; Proverbs 21:3; Isaiah 9:7, 33:5, 58:2; Jeremiah 33:15; Ezekiel 18:5, 19:27, 33:14-19, 45:9; Amos 5:24.

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But that hardly clarifies what righteousness looks like. Over time, righteousness came to be understood as being charitable, as seen in Matthew 6:1-2, “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them. Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you...” Charity may be part of righteousness, but so is justice and so are saving acts (which is a form of charity). Matthew 6:33 states that we should seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness. God’s kingdom goes hand-in-hand with God’s redemptive, saving activity. And, Paul states, through the work of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, we become part of the redemptive saving plan or the ‘righteousness of God’.

### ACNA Readings

**II Corinthians 5:14-21.** Paul knew that God is love and that Jesus, the Messiah, truly loved him too. For Paul it was the love of Jesus that compelled him to continue to proclaim the good news, despite trials and tribulations and even possible death. But the love of Jesus was not only for Paul and Jesus’ closest disciples. Jesus didn’t only die for Paul, or Peter, or James. He had love for all and so died for all.<sup>14</sup> And so, we too must act.

Because Jesus has died for all then Paul says we should now “regard no one according to the flesh”. This is not to say that the physical world is evil and bad, which was a common thought in Greek philosophy in the 1st Century (and influenced several early Christian and Jewish theologians). Instead we are new creations and should see each other as we will be, a house not made with hands but rather eternal in the heavens. This outlook even included Jesus.<sup>15</sup> Though we are all mortal and physical creatures, we have an immortal soul (and will one day have a body that will neither feel pain, sorrow, nor taste death).

If we saw each other in this way, it would eliminate racism and discrimination from within our communities as we relate to each other as “new creations”.<sup>16</sup> The work of the Messiah to

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<sup>14</sup> This does not mean that all will be saved from death through Jesus’ death. Jesus died for all, but if everyone were automatically saved, what would Paul be compelled to do? Why would Paul have spoken so forthrightly about the god of this world blinding the minds of the unbelievers and why would he feel the need to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord?

<sup>15</sup> Paul says, “even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard Him thus no longer.” Paul may be referring to his own encounter on the road to Damascus or Paul may have even seen Jesus as a Pharisee and student of Gamaliel when visiting Jerusalem for the festivals when he was younger or even to the community of Christians who may have known Jesus personally. Who the “we” are here is not clear.

<sup>16</sup> C.S. Lewis, in *The Weight of Glory* stated, “There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit - immortal horrors or everlasting splendors. This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play. But our

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redeem the world from sin and death was only one aspect of the ministry of Jesus. Another is the ministry of reconciliation in which things that separate us relationally from the Lord, and from each other, are removed through the resurrected life of the Messiah. Paul reminds us here that God has given believers the ministry of reconciliation. We continue to participate in the work and mission of the Messiah. That work must be seen in our personal and community lives. Things that once held us apart from God and from each other, like discrimination, should be removed from our communities. In serving to reconcile man with God and with one another (the conclusion of the love of Jesus that compelled Paul), we become the righteousness of God.<sup>17</sup>

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merriment must be of that kind (and it is, in fact, the merriest kind) which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously - no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption.”

<sup>17</sup> See Hebraic Perspective.

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