

Job, an Odyssey of Faith

Session One – An Introduction

1. Getting Started – (1) Tell us one thing about your week. (2) Tell us how long you've been at DaySpring (3) Now, just free associate, when I say, "The Story of Job" what comes to mind and tell us in as few words as possible.
2. Job is not a traditional Lenten story but I do think there will be connections to Lenten themes like the role of suffering in or becoming.
3. We'll actually start looking at the story next week... today I just want us to spend sometime remembering together two things.

The Human Vocation

I. First, I want us to remember why we're here. I want us to remember and connect with the point... The why... Our Telos. What's the point of being a human being? What's our vocation?

1. The earliest theologians had a wonderful vision, a very high and lofty understanding of our nature and the journey we can make.

- Gregory of Nazianzen (4th century) wrote, *"The great architect of the universe conceived and produced a being endowed with both natures, the visible and the invisible... Thus in some way, a new universe was born, small and great are one at the same time."* (The Roots of Christian Mysticism, Gregory of Nazianzen, Roots of Christian Mysticism, p.77)
- Ireneus said, *"It was necessary in the first place for human beings to be created; and having been created to grow; and having grown to become adult; and having become adult to multiply; and having multiplied to become strong; and having become strong to be glorified; and having become glorified to see their Lord. Indeed the vision of God obtains deliverance from death, the incorruptibility, which is the expression of our union with God."*
- "It is," as Origen puts it, *"to make of human nature a glorious temple."* (Clement, 76)
- **Read the summary from Clement, p 77-78.**

2. You probably didn't think about that when you woke up today. ... that we're made for something glorious. You just got up and had some coffee and came to Zoom Church... not remembering that you have a glorious vocation.

You just did what you do on Sunday morning. And that's what we do... just getting through... on auto-pilot... and maybe often sleep-walking our way through life.

- Did see the Lion King? Do you remember where the King says to his son, **“Simba, you’ve become less than you are?”** That’s as good a description of the fallen human condition that I’ve ever read... **We are less than we are, somewhere out there east of Eden, not as alive as we could be... not as awake as we could be... not as loving ... not as content... not as joyful... We forget our calling.**
- **And so our story... the biblical story... is the story of God reaching towards us and lifting us up so that we might become what we are. And what I want to suggest today is that this is the great theme of scripture...**
It’s the thread running through it and beneath it...
It’s the backdrop behind it...
It’s the climax towards which the story unfolds.

3. And it is an unfolding for us all. And this morning I want to acknowledge a paradox. It’s important to remember that all of our central doctrines in the Christian faith are a paradox.

- Jesus is a human being and Jesus is _____?
- The Lord our God is One... and God somehow is also 3?
- The bible is the word of God and it’s written by human being.

Well, the becoming of human beings is a paradox in that each story lived is utterly unique.

- the universe is personal, it’s relational, and God’s creation seems to have a curriculum with your name on it. What it seems you need next will always find you.
- *“God will come to you disguised as your life,”* as one teacher says it.
- Something unique is uniquely being worked out. The you and you are essentially, is becoming.
- Your journey is one of a kind.

4. And yet.. it’s not. The story of our becoming, is one that has chapters and chapters in which we progress... are at least it’s possible that we do. And chapters that are “predictable.”

- I got fascinated by this and drawn in first by James Fowler... who wrote “Stages of Faith” back in the 80s.
- Maybe you’ll recall some Psychology 101 and some of those developmental theorists like Erikson or Piaget or Kohlberg... James Fowler was doing that kind of work, using some of their research and his own as I recall.

But this way of thinking wasn't new as always there is a great cloud of witnesses, through scripture and through the Wisdom of the Church and the Spiritual Tradition... that has always contended that there are stages we go through in the spiritual journey.

- So... while every story is unique... we do have some sense about the redemptive plot and what it takes to move a story towards its glorious climax.
- The bible is a sort of road map for a transformative journey.... There's a map and, though it's been lost to us at times, the Church has always known about the map.

5. As I was preaching one fall back when I was at DaySpring, the Lectionary took us through Job as it does every three years. And I guess I was doing a lot of reading from the Desert Fathers and Mothers and I found myself seeing the story developmentally.

- Job, I've always been taught, is the oldest book in the Bible.... I'm not sure that's still the prevailing thinking but this is ancient wisdom.
- And I do think that as it is a part of the wisdom section of the Hebrew canon, that the canon committee, the community of place placed it right in the middle. In between the Patriarchs and the Prophets.
- That's very important... I think. Job occupies a place of prominence in scripture... Don't miss that. When our forebears, under the inspiration of the Spirit, put the canon together they were trying to tell us things that were important... and Job is front and center.
- And it's a story about someone's transformation. It's a Faith Odyssey and I'm going to suggest to us that it's one the Church needs to be mindful of so that we can help one another make this great journey towards becoming what we are.

Which may be a new idea, so I want to take the rest of our time together this morning to talk about scripture and the way it unfolds.

Levels of Meaning in Scripture

II. **Sacred scripture is multi-layered.** In other words, in many, if not most cases, there are multiple meanings of a text and that's not only good but it's intended. But... it's very important for a community to see this and dangerous to our spiritual health when we don't see it.

- The ancient community that first received and interpreted and taught the Bible... would have known this and been very comfortable with this.

- The bible comes from a world where this layered way of knowing was familiar... at least to those who were wise. (Paul McCartney, “Let it Be.”?)
- There’s a journey and odyssey... and the bible functions in different ways for different people depending on where they are.

I’m going to take us through these levels and try to name them... remembering that we are also on unique journeys and God reaches people when and how God chooses.

- Some ancient writers referred to the “senses of scripture” ... describing what we are perceiving and how what we’re able to see changes as we grow.
- I want to say that we have to see these levels sort of accumulate, they build on and lead to one another. So, when we think of the stages of faith we “**transcend and include.**”

The Ways in Which We Hold Scripture

1. Literal and Narrative – **Our Story Book**

This is the way scripture is held with the children in our preschool class this morning. It’s their story book. What do they always have during Sunday School?

They always have story time...

We just tell the stories... (Noah, David, Moses, Baby Jesus, Jesus and the Fishes, Paul on the Road to Damascus) We just tell the stories.

- No one looks at a preschooler and says, “**Now, what does that story mean to you?**”
- No one says, “**Now, did you notice that there are two creation stories in Genesis?**”
- No one tries to explain the culture of human sacrifice to a preschooler prior to telling her or him about Abraham and Isaac.
- **We just tell the stories. This happened and then that happened. And we don’t stutter. Here is what happened?**
- Some of us... moderates or progressives, struggle here and that’s not helpful because we all need a narrative... a story that holds meanings that we can’t begin to express.

2. Moral and Doctrinal – **Our Book of Beliefs and Behaviors**

At this level of meaning we begin to say, “**so what?**” It means we hold scripture trusting that it will show us what is right and good. So, we not only tell our children the story of Moses bringing the Ten Commandments down from Sinai but that we’re having them memorize them in VBS.

There are “dos and don’ts” and we got them from the bible. **“The Bible says....”**
We don’t lie...

We care about the poor.

We honor our parents.

We don’t eat forbidden fruit.

It means that we tell them the story of Zacchaeus... and we talk about what Zacchaeus did at the end because we have to learn how to make amends. The Bible teaches us to be just and equitable.

- Holding scripture as a “container” to impart means, we not only tell the story the birth of Jesus but we teach the doctrine of Incarnation. **“Yes, it’s confusing but Jesus is human and divine.”**
- We not only tell a story about the death of Jesus but we teach about the significance of it.
- This happened and here’s what means for us, what it tells us about God, and to what God is calling us. This is who we are and what we believe as a community.

Holding scripture this way is actually more of a rational experience. It is Bible Drill and it’s Doctrine Drill... it’s catechesis. It’s memorizing being initiated... it’s the time when we enculturate our children. We create for them... A CONTAINER.

3. Personal and Devotional – **The Book of My Life... My Book**

This is that level of scripture where we start saying things like, “Well, what do I think of this?” Or “How can I apply this to my daily life?” or “Which character in the story about the ‘loaves and fishes’ do you most identify with.” “How is God speaking to me.”

It’s a stage where... the facts and the exegesis aren’t unimportant but the main thing is *“what difference to me tomorrow.”*

I was doing some teaching in a church back in the 90s (getting deep with John’s gospel) and I thought it was going great (I was sure enjoying what I was saying) and the department director pulled me aside after a few weeks and said, “Um... we need you to start applying this to our daily lives.” That’s stage three.

Again... we’re trying to ask... what does a person see... perceive... what are they ready to receive... where is their hunger. Does any of this matter on Mondays.

This is often a very sentimental experience. In the same way we’ve said in Baptist life, we have **“a personal relationship to Jesus...”** There is a personal relationship to the text. Years ago, I was giving a fellow seminarian a ride once and after she got in the car she said with alarm and affection, **“O gosh, wait, I forgot “my Word.”**

4. Allegorical – **This is the Book of Essence**

Some might use archetypal or symbolic.

When we hold scripture this way things have gotten larger and it's not just a cannon of stories, the questions aren't about the rules and they aren't about rational doctrines or about what it means to me... It's about what does this mean at the largest, deepest, truest level.

This is truth that is perennial... and that shows up in the universe and in every soul and the Bible resonates with it and sheds light on it.

And this particular way of holding scripture will be especially important as we engage Job tomorrow/next week.

The bible now becomes a kind of hologram for the soul's journey.

- We begin to see spiritual truths that are embodied in our stories, in my story, in history, in what is beyond.
- We begin to see metaphysical realities that are behind our historical narratives and our rational doctrines.
- We see essential patterns that have been
revealed in redemptive history
and in the Wisdom of Ages
and through the teachings of the Church.

Every story is now about God and who God is and what God is like. The Song of Solomon isn't about sex and romance, it's about God and God's relationship to God's people.

This experience is enlarging... it is humbling... it is encompassing.

5. Contemplative and Mystical – **The Book of Union**

This is that final approach to scripture where we are experiencing truth at a different level all together and it's in this level where we find ourselves caught up in God and not just our thinking about God. The word has become Word to us.

This experience is transcendent and unitive... we know but couldn't for the life of us put what we know into words.

Now remember, all of these levels are important... and to be at one level with the Bible doesn't mean the others are no longer applicable or important. We transcend and include.

But ... we do have to know that as we progress these other senses are more appropriate and if we don't move there the old levels can actually become problematic.

The Spiritual teachers in the early centuries used the analogy of a nut... they used Hazelnut... but we should use a pecan... a Texas pecan.

The husk is the literal level.... That rubbery protective layer.

It's necessary for pecan pie but but you can't eat it, can you?

The shell is the moral, doctrinal, rational way of holding scripture...

Still necessary if we're going to enjoy a thanksgiving feast

but everyone knows you can't eat it.

The meat of the pecan... is the allegorical and contemplative level. That's where the meat is

All of the stages of a pecans becoming are necessary but only one of them finally provides the true nourishment that we need.

The letter of the law... does what? It Kills...

Staying at a literal level is like trying to eat the shell. But... if you don't have the shell, if you don't have the husk... you will never have pecans on your pie on Thanksgiving Day.

Looking at a Text or Two

Now... bear in mind that not every text can be apprehended at every level... most, however, can. Even if the first time we read them we can't.

Mark 1

Luke 5: 1-11

John 2: 13-21

John 6: 13

"As one's level of being increases, receptivity to higher meaning increases. As one's being decreases, the old meanings return." (Maurice Nicoll).