

October 14, 2018

Job 23:1-9, 16-17

Psalm 22:1-15

Hebrews 4:12-16

Mark 10:17-31

The God of Change

In his wise and eloquent memoir, *My Bright Abyss*, poet Christian Wiman argues that change is essential to authentic spiritual life. "Faith is not some half-remembered country into which you come like a long-exiled king," he writes, "dispensing the old wisdom.... Life is not an error, even when it is. That is to say, whatever faith you emerge with at the end of your life is going to be not simply affected by that life but intimately dependent upon it, for faith in God is, in the deepest sense, faith in life — which means that even the staunchest life of faith is a life of great change. It follows that if you believe at fifty what you believed at fifteen, then you have not lived — or have denied the reality of your life."

This week's lectionary readings offer us four poignant affirmations of Wiman's claim, four poignant affirmations that Jesus turns convention on its head.

Each of the texts is embattled.

Each confronts a belief we take for granted,
and turns it on its head.

Each wrestles with old, inadequate gods —

The gods of convention,
the gods of convenience,

The gods of common sense —

And breaks through to a truer and richer conception of the divine.

In the Old Testament reading, we find Job on an ash heap, surrounded by clueless friends, and suffering just about every misery known to humankind. One of his friends, Eliphaz, has just finished giving Job a lecture, and now it's Job's turn to respond. He does so in thundering indignation, each word testifying to the theological war raging within him.

Who is God?

Where is God?

What can human beings reasonably expect from a life of faith?

Job's answers to these questions are shot through with ambivalence. God is nowhere: "If I go forward, God is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive God." And yet God is oppressively everywhere: "His hand is heavy despite my groaning... I am terrified at his presence." Job wants nothing more than to confront God face to face: "Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling!" And yet he's desperate to leave God's sight: "If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!"



As this inner battle rages on, Job maintains faith in his own spiritual credentials: "I have not departed from the commandment of his lips." And yet he finds (to his bewilderment) that his credentials will not protect him: "But [God] stands alone and who can dissuade him? What he desires, he does."

In this scene, Job is not a tame man seeking a tame God. He's a God-haunted man pursuing the passion of his life, only to crash again and again *and again* into the limits of his experience and knowledge. The God he thought he knew is no longer adequate. The formula he'd organised his life around (If I do A, God will do B) has failed. Either he must step in to change and mystery, or lose his faith altogether.

This is religion at its wildest — a journey towards the Presence that is Absence, the Safety that is Terror, the Knowing that is always, in this life, the BIG *Unknowing*.

If we read Job's story looking for coherence, we won't find it; it's a story at war with itself. In his book, *How to Read the Bible*, scholar James L. Kugel describes the Book of Job as a nuanced dialogue between the Israelite wisdom tradition, and the realities of faith in a messy world. The wisdom tradition holds that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. In wisdom's worldview, prosperity is a sign of

divine blessing, and deprivation signifies the withdrawal of that blessing. To suffer, in other words, is to experience God's displeasure.

It's this received "wisdom" Job must wrestle with when his life falls apart. It's the wisdom his friend's attempt (and fail) to reconcile with lived reality. Interestingly, it's stale, unchanging piety that keeps Job's friends from encountering God. Strapped to the theology they know best, they find themselves sidelined when God finally shows up. And it's Job's "blasphemy" — his refusal to swallow any theology that doesn't jibe with the real-time truth of his own life — that earns him an audience with God.

Let's fast-forward a few centuries. To this week's Gospel reading, a rich young man kneels at Jesus's feet. "Good Teacher," he says fervently, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"



It's a minister's dream question. So much hunger, so much readiness — a soul ripe for the plucking. How easy it would have been for Jesus to secure an eager new convert, a rich convert. How easily he could have said the warm and welcoming thing: "What? You've already followed the

commandments for years? Excellent! And you're already calling me "good"? Then you must know who I am because only God is good! Wow! I'm impressed! You're in!" You are welcome at St Andrews.

Or else, Jesus could have worked in increments, easing his new convert into the values of God's kingdom: "How about you write a small check to charity this year? Nothing scary, nothing that will break the bank. Just a token?"

But no. Jesus has little interest in his followers' ease or comfort; He takes another route entirely. "Jesus, looking at him, loved him," the text says. Jesus *loved him* — and *because* he loved him, he said the truthful thing, the hard, unpalatable thing he knew would cause the young man's fervour to dissipate on the spot. "Sell what you own. Give to the poor. Follow me."

We just wouldn't want Jesus on the front door welcoming people with that sort of attitude, would we?

The text says the man "was shocked and went away grieving." I imagine he was shocked because he considered his wealth an entitlement — a symbol not only of his worldly accomplishments but also of God's favour. How terrible to be told that his best credential was a liability and a burden. How grievous to realise that God's kingdom was not custom designed for his ease — that he might not like it, or agree with its priorities, or find common cause with its inhabitants. How shocking to encounter a God who is so scandalously

honest — a God who strips us of our entitlements and freely hands us reasons to walk away.

This, as far as I know, is the only 'call' story in all the Gospels in which someone refuses to follow Jesus ... and seems to be over money.

Our Psalm reading this week, a pure lament, also gives us reasons to pause and re-examine our certainties about the divine: "Oh my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest." "I am poured out like water... you lay me in the dust of death."

At the centre of this lament is the poet's struggle to reconcile conflicting notions of who God is. In David's particular case, the battle is between the famed God of family lore, and the absent God who eludes him in real life. "In you our ancestors trusted," he cries out in confusion. "They trusted, and you delivered them."

So what about me? "My God, my God, why have you forsaken *me*?" For those of us who grew up in the Church, steeped in the spiritual stories of other believers, this is a cry we can relate to. Like David, we trace our faith histories back a long way: "On you, I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God."



Of course, it's entirely appropriate to draw strength and inspiration from our spiritual histories.

And yet somewhere along the way,

We might find that the God who *was* —

The God whose stories we know;

The God we've learned to trust by way of tradition, ancestral history, or community lore;

The God whose faithfulness we assume will look identical from year to year, generation to generation —

It isn't familiar with the life we find ourselves in. In such moments, we discover that it's one thing to know God in abstraction, and another to know God personally.

David's cry is the plea for relevance, ~~Wiman writes about so~~ *sagely*. I know the God of my ancestors.

But who is God *right here? Right now? For me?*

Which brings us to Hebrews 4:12–16, a passage that epitomises the tensions running through this week's

lectionary. The writer of Hebrews describes the Word of God as active, sharp, and piercing — a two-edged sword that divides soul from spirit, joint from marrow. This is a naked-making Word — a Word who sees all exposes all, and judges all.

And yet this Word is also a merciful and gracious high priest — the Son of God who knows our weaknesses and vulnerabilities, the One whose throne we can approach with honesty and full confidence.

How can he be both?

Piercing and gracious?

Judging and sympathetic?

How can the Word that cuts be the Word that heals? With God, Jesus tells the rich young man, the impossible is possible.

Read together, these four lectionary readings make the known god the unknown God. They challenge us to lifetimes of change. They invite us to encounter God freshly again and again,

apart from our traditions,

apart from our religiosity,

apart from our memory,

apart from our theology,

apart from the abstract.

If we're willing to engage with the tensions in these readings, they can offer surprising clues about who God is and what God cherishes.

The God who dismisses the pious to answer a loudmouth on an ash heap.

The God who loves us enough to let us walk away.

The God who will not allow us to rest on our histories.

The God whose grace cuts deeper than a sword.

May we dare to wrestle past the gods we have known — the gods who keep us safe but cannot save us. May we approach with boldness the untamed God who insists on change for the sake of salvation.