Sermon
October 21, 2018
Proper 24B
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Job 38.1-7 (34.41)
Psalm 104.1-9, 24, 37b
Hebrews 5.1-10
Mark 10.35-45

I have to admit that, over the last 25-plus years of my priesthood, I’ve never had to preach through the gospel of Mark in the focused way I’ve experienced this fall. In the past I’ve mostly been a “guest preacher” in a variety of pulpits, usually trying to tie the lessons into my work on college campuses. But this fall, and especially over the last couple of weeks, I’ve been struck by Mark’s concern with “greatness”. Whether it’s pulling a child into the mix as an object-lesson or contrasting Christ-like leadership with the “tyrants” of the Gentiles, Mark’s 10th chapter seems like an extended meditation on where true “greatness” is to be found. But, as I’ve identified a couple of times over the last several weeks as well, those folks who put together our lectionary — our set of Sunday readings — have provided other means of illuminating the Gospel reading.

But first, before I go any further, I need to head off on a little tangent, but one that will appear again down the road. I have to admit that I am an “Indiana Jones” junky; I have just loved watching Harrison Ford play Indy (most of the time). The first film was simply great fun. The second in the series was, on the other hand . . . well, gross and forgettable. But the third! Well, it also had Sean Connery — so what’s not to like!? And, it is from this last film of the series that I find a pointer to what we just heard in the lessons today. If you remember (or don’t know), at the climax of the last movie, Indy has to choose from a selection of chalices — WHICH is the Holy Grail — that is, which is the TRUE way of Christ? Given the various previous attempts in the film (which don’t end well), Indy knows that he has to “choose wisely”, or he will die. Without spoiling it for those who’ve not seen it, I’ll just leave it to your imagination (or memory) dot, dot dot, which, among the many options, is the “great” chalice.

Holding that image in mind, — that is, which is the TRUE way of Christ, I want to return to our lessons today. Recall where we began, with Job. The book of Job is, in many ways, an extended, poetic critique of overly-simplistic ways of understanding the presence of suffering in the world. Job’s original readers held much the same idea as, perhaps, many of us and our contemporaries; that is, “If something bad happens to you, it’s because of something you did. You may not have recognized, or remembered, your bad deed, but God does, and you’re suffering for that mistake.” The problem with this karmic argument is that even God admits that Job has been totally righteous (1.5, 8; 2.3), so the suffering to
which Job is subjected is wholly undeserved. Job’s “friends” try to help him “understand” that some unknown sin must account for his suffering. Job will have none of that! He then pleads with God for an explanation. And what we heard this morning is God’s answer: “You weren’t there at the creation of the universe. Look how amazing it is! Only a being like me could come up with something approaching this complex, this grand. You’ll never understand what’s happening.” Not a particularly pastoral response from God. . . . But righteous, faithful, Job accepts the answer, and his place in the greater scheme of things. And, for his refusal to assume the “greatness” of God, he is rewarded with more wealth than he previously had.

The theme of God’s grandeur is picked up in the psalm we just read as well. One would assume that “greatness” is found in being “clothed in majesty and splendor” — which, of course, is attributed to God. Much of what’s in Psalm 104 echoes the claims of God in Job. Indeed, scholars see both Job 38 and Psalm 104 as echoing an even more ancient Egyptian wisdom psalm acclamining the greatness of the god Aten. All point to the extraordinary greatness of the divinity, and all end in somewhat the same way; in the words of Psalm 104.24: it is the place for humans simply to “go forth to their work, and to their labor until the evening”. In other words, leave God’s greatness to God. “Hallelujah!”

In our journey through today’s readings, however, we begin to see a bit of a shift in the understanding of “greatness”, as well as suffering, in our reading from Hebrews. The author compares Jesus to the Jewish institution of “high priest”, noting that the high priest, as a human being, could identify with other humans in our fallibility and our sufferings, and therefore make sin offerings on our (as well as his own) behalf. Jesus, as God-in-the-flesh, however, experienced and learned suffering. Therefore he was able to relate that experience to the god-head in a way that a merely human high priest could not. In the words of the great hymn from Philippians, Christ “being in the form of God, did not count equality with God [— that is, greatness —] as something to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are . . . And for this God raised him high, and gave him the name which is above all other names” (2. 6-7, 9). That is, the grandeur of God was re-defined in Jesus as taking on the sufferings of others.

And, then, we come to Mark, and the often-so-clueless disciples. Recognizing, perhaps, that the “kingdom was about to come” with Jesus’ death (since he had just given his third prediction of his passion), James and John ask Jesus that they be given privileged seats in that new realm, hoping, perhaps, to be the great king’s vice-regents. They are absolutely eager to drink Jesus’ cup and experience Jesus’ baptism . . . as they understood them. But they got it all wrong.
The cup and baptism of Jesus are not a gold chalice (remember Indiana Jones) or a warm hot-tub. Those things might be “greatness” as defined by the rulers of this world. But greatness in Jesus’ kingdom is defined by humility, suffering and service to all.

Today’s lessons seem to have an arc to them; there appears to be a movement from awe-inspiring grandeur to intimate self-identification with the lowly, that is, us. I saw another example of this in a movie about a newly-declared saint. Many of you may have heard that, earlier this week, Pope Francis elevated both Pope Paul VI and Archbishop Oscar Romero to the ranks of sainthood. That action prompted me to track down the film about Romero, to help me remember what it was that made him a candidate for sainthood.

The movie opens with Romero—played by another wonderful actor, the late Raul Julia—already a bishop in El Salvador, living a comfortable, rather unremarkable, life. El Salvador’s previous archbishop had died, and there was concern about who might be named in his place, especially given the socio-political turmoil in the country. Romero, to his great surprise, was named to the arch-episcopal seat. Believing him to be too identified with the cultural elite, some of the more progressive clergy were dismayed with the choice. Others, including that elite, saw him as a very moderate, stay-the-course, selection; one who wouldn’t rock the boat in El Salvador’s turbulent political sea. And, at the beginning of the film, the latter group was right. Romero appears often in the company of the powerful, in his archbishop’s robes, with folks kneeling to kiss his ring.

But, as the story progresses he becomes increasingly aware of, and affected by, the plight of the peasants in El Salvador. Likewise, he becomes increasingly aware of the way the privileged class ignores that plight and continues to exploit the workers. Tragedy after tragedy hits the people and Romero and, in the course of the movie (and, of course, his life), he begins to identify more and more with those poor folks. He is no longer partying with the wealthy, and much less often seen in fancy robes. By the end of the film his clerical robe is torn and dirty; he celebrates mass outside a church-repurposed-to-barracks, and he is hugged and cheered by the common people of the country. There is no “spoiler-alert” here; we know that Archbishop Romero was murdered because of this identification with the lowly. Supposed “greatness” was met with true greatness; it was Romero who was eventually declared a saint.

We have a long history, we humans — and Christians, of equating greatness with shows of grandeur, displays of power. We often hope, as a religious people, to have seats on Jesus’ right and left, believing those seats to be in an amazingly appointed heavenly throne room. Indeed, often our church architecture replicates
that vision. And, clearly, for many people, the ability to walk into a gothic cathedral like St. John’s offers a chance to soar to the heavens, momentarily away from their difficult life.

We, here, however, have a different kind of space. A space that points in its very architecture to different vision of “greatness”. This “semi-in-the-round” configuration lets us see one another more easily; we can focus on individual faces, faces that express joy or sorrow or pain. This is not to say that we are not often transported by beautiful music or the play of light through the stained glass. But we are made a people by this space, a people with the Good Shepherd as its heart, fed by that Shepherd at this table, not with a fabulous gourmet meal, but with more glorious simple fare: bread and wine.

As I mentioned a bit earlier, the lessons took us on a bit of journey — from awe to intimacy. There is another movement, however, made most pointedly in the reading from Mark. And that movement is from individual wants and needs to those of the community. James and John wanted special places in the coming kingdom. Jesus turned that around and placed the needs of the citizens of the kingdom above those desires of the wannabe rulers. The focus of attention is made quite different.

Jesus demands that we see “greatness” from another point of view. It is a bottom-up, not top-down, vision. While none of us may be asked to follow the path of Oscar Romero, neither can any of us ignore the marginalized members of our community, either within these walls or without. We are not offered static seats on Jesus’ right or left hand. We are, however, offered places next to Jesus as we walk together to bring hope to those who need it. What a great place to be. What a great calling to have.

Amen.