



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Who's Behind the Curtain?  
Job 23:1-9, 16:1-17; Hebrews 4:12-16

I am sometimes surprised by the ways in which ideas for my sermons originate. I always hope that it is primarily through inspiration. I want to believe that God is speaking to me and through me in obvious or subtle ways to offer you words that will nudge, comfort, stir, or unsettle you in whatever ways you need. Often I fear that some of my ideas erupt from desperation as I scramble to think of something halfway meaningful to offer you week by week. Whichever it is—or a combination of the two—I pray God will be in it and bless it for us all.

Nevertheless, I take full responsibility for where my thoughts lead me as I probe a particular biblical text for sermonic ideas. This week's sermon is a case in point. I read and reflected on the passages from the Book of Job and the Letter to the Hebrews. I recognized immediately that the two readings had different tones and perspectives. As one might expect, Job's thoughts are dark, anguished, contradictory, and challenging befitting someone who has suffered as much as he did. On the other hand, the words from the Letter

to the Hebrews are positive, uplifting, and celebratory of who Christ is and what he does for us.

At the heart of these two passages, written perhaps five to eight hundred years apart, is the issue of the nature of God. Who is God and where is God in relation to his people? That conclusion and the heart of this sermon led me on one of those winding roads my mind takes sometimes on the way to stepping into this pulpit on Sunday morning.

I often try to think of things in our popular culture that resonate with what is going on in the biblical stories. This past week I stumbled across a rather bizarre but intriguing idea. Reading about the Book of Job, I noted that the story tells us that Job was a man living in the land of Uz. Some people think that Uz was the land of Edom, the area below the Dead Sea spilling over into what is now Jordan. Others think that Uz was simply a name that meant someplace far away.<sup>1</sup> Many of our best and most instructive stories begin with “Long ago, in a land far away . . . .” Uz may well have been one of those far away places that turns out to be rather close to home.

I also noted in the passage we read earlier, that Job speaks of God as a judge, as one who would be willing to hear his case and help him except

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<sup>1</sup>Samuel E. Ballentine, “Introduction to Job,” *Mercer Commentary on the Bible*, Watson E. Mills and Richard F. Wilson, eds. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995), 405.

that he is hidden away and Job cannot find him. I let those ideas ramble around in my brain for a while and I began to remember a story with similar details, a story you know very well.

It may not be surprising that my brain jumped from the land of Uz to the Land of Oz. As I thought about that other far away place, I remembered that the Wizard of Oz was hidden away in the Emerald City and difficult to find. I do not think at all that L. Frank Baum wrote a theological allegory when he wrote the Oz books over a century ago, but I cannot deny that I made some connections between the two stories that were helpful to me. If we think about Dorothy's journey (might we say "pilgrimage"?) to the Emerald City, the losses and hardships she and her friends faced, and her struggle to keep her spirits and her hope up, we may be better able to understand some of Job's struggles to remain optimistic in the face of enormous loss and personal affliction. Moreover, when we remember the numerous obstacles Dorothy and her friends encountered in their efforts to find the Wizard, we may be better able to think about Job's struggle to find God and lay his case before him.

You will remember that after the friends reach the Emerald City and gain an audience with the Wizard, all they get is an enormous head surrounded by bursts of fire and smoke. There is no approachability, no opportunity for

relationship. And when they return with the broom belonging to the Wicked Witch of the West after destroying her, they continue to get the run around. Finally, thanks to Toto's curiosity, the curtain is pulled back to reveal the Wizard who turns out to anything but a wizard. He is simply an ordinary fellow from Kansas who fancies himself a magician. In an effort to win the trust and fear of the people of the Emerald City, he used smoke and mirrors to create an illusion of power. In truth, as we learn at the end of the story, it was his kindness and helpfulness that endeared the people to him.

As I read about Job's search for the One who can answer his requests and set his life right again, I think about my own life and the questions I have about how the world works. I cannot help but wonder who is behind the curtain that hides God from us. Is God this powerful and sometimes capricious judge or someone quite different. Are we surprised to discover who God really is? Who is behind the curtain of faith?

Job's story begins in a surprising way. God is holding court with his heavenly assistants gathered around him. One of them, the one named *hasatan* or "the Satan," has returned from an excursion on the earth where he was checking on humans to see if they were living up to their claims of integrity and faithfulness. At this point in Hebrew thought, Satan is not the evil devil with the pitchfork and long, pointed tail. He is something like God's

prosecuting attorney<sup>2</sup>, handling cases of misconduct on the earth. With not a little bit of swagger, God asks Satan if he has checked on Job, one man God knows for certain is upright and faithful. Satan replies that he has seen Job but contends that Job has it too easy. His prosperity has made his faithfulness easy. He suggests that if Job encountered a little hardship in his life, he might not be as faithful as God thinks he is.

God and his helper make a little bet concerning Job and Satan takes away Job's children and possessions. Still Job remains faithful. Satan again suggests that if Job suffered physically, he would react negatively, so Job is afflicted with sores and further suffering. Still, Job maintains his loyalty to God. As in our reading today, however, when we find Job sitting on the garbage heap of the town, he has just about had enough. His friends have not been helpful at all. His wife does not understand his persistent faithfulness. He is at his wit's end. He longs to find God and lay his case before him, knowing that God would understand and be fair toward him. But he cannot find God. It is as if God is hidden, maybe behind a cosmic curtain. Furthermore, he is not really certain he wants to find God because he is afraid of him. Job wishes he could just slip into darkness and disappear. Have you ever felt that way? I have.

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<sup>2</sup>Ballentine.

Have you ever wondered who is behind the curtain? Have you ever wondered where God is when things go bad? I have. This past week, when the body of ten year old Jessica Ridgeway was discovered, I wondered where God was when she began walking to school a little over a week ago. When two of our dear friends were attacked here five years ago, killing one of them, I wondered where God was. When crime, violence, and poverty continue to escalate in our community despite our efforts to curtail all three, I wonder where God is. When personal tragedy or illness befalls any one of us, I wonder where God is. When the world continues to get more dangerous by the day, I wonder where in the world God is!

It is not that I lay the blame for suffering at God's feet. I don't think God inspired that little girl's assailant to do whatever he did. I don't think God inflicts us with illness or disease. I don't believe God sends tornados, earthquakes, hurricanes, or fires to us. I don't even believe that God places bets on whether or not we will remain faithful under duress, but I do wonder where God is in the midst of it all. I want to look behind the curtain and discover exactly who this God is whom we worship and trust.

When the story of Job was first passed from generation to generation, people believed that gods controlled everything that happened in life. The gods (and there were believed to be many of them) were seen as all-powerful

and distant. The gods controlled everything that happened and were justified in the bad as well as congratulated for the good.

The Hebrew understanding of God introduced for the first time the idea of one God who personally interacted with people. Although Job's story does include this idea of a God who is willing to let his people be tested, by the end of the story God and Job are having a heart to heart conversation. Furthermore, the story of the Hebrew people affirms that God is not distant and aloof or capricious and vengeful. God is engaged with his people and always looking out for their best interests despite the dilemmas they create for themselves.

Granted, in the story of Job we feel as if we are standing with Job in a great throne room filled with fire and smoke, begging for God to appear and reveal himself, to answer for all that happens in life. The story does not stop there, however. In the next chapter of God's story, told in the New Testament, the curtain is pulled back revealing a very different God from the one Job and so many others saw. Instead of an angry god frustrated with human folly and armed with power to destroy as well as to heal, we see the Compassionate Christ with arms opened wide to embrace the ones who have journeyed far to discover him.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews helps. He has seen just as much hardship, pain, anguish, and suffering as we have. He does not want to hide out of fear like Job. Instead, he understands that we have an advocate, a confidant, a companion on the journey who is Jesus Christ. He writes, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (4:15-16). Whereas Job was afraid to confront God even though he felt justified, the New Testament writer is bold to rush forward and embrace the Risen Christ without fear or reservation.

The God revealed in the New Testament is a God who desires to know his people and experience life with us. It is a God intimately engaged with us because he came and lived as one of us. He experienced life in every way that we do, even walking through the valley of death into the garden of eternal life. The story of Job helps us as we wrestle with our own questions about good and evil, about unjust suffering and the presence of God in the world. It does not answer all of our questions, though. There is still a curtain in that story. God still remains hidden to some degree.

In Jesus Christ, however, the curtain is pulled back and God stands clearly revealed and engaged with the world. God stands with us in good times and bad times. He sits with us when we struggle and grieve. He cheers with us when we succeed. God provides what we need: insight, courage, compassion, and comfort. Above all, God in Christ offers us what we all need and long for—a place to call home for our souls. It is not with a clicking of the heels, but with a yielding of our spirits that we discover in Christ our true home. That, my friends, is a wonderful story with a happy ending that continues for eternity. Thanks be to God. Amen.

October 14, 2012

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We inhale life giving breath and then exhale grateful praise, O God, for there is so much for which we are thankful and so many ways in which we recognize your handiwork in our world. Beautiful fall days remind us of the creative power of your love and the fact that life is defiant even in the face of death. Creation sparkles with the power of your love that keeps life vibrant. When problems that seem insurmountable come our way, hope and strength well up within from places we do not understand. We recognize this grace as a gift from you so praise be to you, O God, for all of the goodness that comes into our lives.

Thank you as well for all of the help that comes our way. You have heard us mention the names of friends who have special needs. There are other names that we have not spoken except within our hearts. Attend to them as well, we pray. Some of them are grieving, sobbing with the ache that death brings. Some of them are afraid, uncertain of the outcome of an illness, frightened of the effects of treatment, scared to die and scared to live. Some of them worry about family—spouses and children and parents who are beyond their control and help. Some of them agonize over the future, trying to decide on education, careers, and jobs that will provide what life demands of us all. Some of them are searching for faith or fun or fulfillment or for themselves. They cannot find their help alone, O God, and we cannot provide all that they need. Be for them whatever they need at this time and guide them to the resources that will make the difference in their lives.

Help our world, we pray. We have been fighting for so long that we have forgotten how to work together to solve problems. We have become so focused on our own needs that we forget that others have needs, too. We have been infected with the venom of hatred and revenge that we do not even know how to win well or how to win with grace. Teach us again about cooperation and peace, O God, that we might discover it first within ourselves and then between one another.

You have called us to this place this morning. Now teach us why, O God. Open our eyes and ears and hearts and hands to our calling as your people. Renew us, we pray, and set us upon the foundation that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whose name we make all our prayers. Amen.