

‘Life in Christ: Joy and Challenge’

Job 1:1, 2:1-10

Mark 10:2-16

Proper 22B

7 October, 2012

Rev’d. Tanya Stormo Rasmussen

As I mentioned in my introduction, we’re celebrating a lot of things today:

- * The URC’s 40th Anniversary as a denomination.
- * We’re receiving five people into membership—one of them is making public profession of his faith for the first time, and the other four have also decided that this church community is the family of faith they want to continue to live and grow with.
- * One of our members is going to be ordained today as an Elder, as one of the spiritual leaders of this church.
- * And, it’s World Communion Sunday. The first Sunday in October is regularly set aside by churches all over the world to celebrate the fact that we’re all sharing in communion despite our differences in worship style, some aspects of theology, cultural and traditional practices, etc. The fact that we all join in a celebration of communion together is a reminder that all of us are members of Christ’s body, which spreads clear across the planet.

It seems like, with all of these exciting and important events in our Christian life together, we ought to have some really happy, upbeat scripture lessons to encourage our celebration and talk about how wonderful it is to be a member of this faith community.

Instead, this week the lectionary assigned readings that make it clear that the life of faith is not easy, or always straightforward. There are moments when being faithful can be really tough, and everything we think we know or understand about life gets turned upside down.

That’s how it was for Job and his wife. This is the first of four readings that we’ll have from the Book of Job across the next four Sundays—it’ll be a sort of nutshell version of the whole book, with readings from the beginning, middle, and very end.

We’re not going to spend a long time on it today because we’ve got so many other things to do this morning and we’ll have time to go into greater detail in the weeks ahead, but our introduction to Job this morning is a little bit troubling, to say the least. The opening words of Job’s story are a bunch of superlatives that describe no one we really know in real life, but also describe the person we wish we could be more like: “There lived in the land of Uz a man of blameless and upright life named Job, who feared God and set his face against wrongdoing.” (Job 1:1) We jump from Chapter One verse one right into Chapter Two, and gloss over the devastating bit of the story where God gives ‘the Satan’ permission to wipe out all of Job’s wealth, and to kill off all of his ten children. God is certain that even if everything is taken away from him, Job will remain faithful to God. Satan, the Adversary, challenges God to prove it.

Chapter Two lead into the further adversities Job faces—not only have all his children died, and all his cattle and crops been destroyed along with his workers, but God has allowed him to break out in massive boils and scabs all over his body. “Do as you like with him,” God says to the Satan, “just spare his life.” The point at which we picked up the story, we see him still patiently bearing up under the hell that his life has become, sitting on a pile of ashes and scratching his boil-encrusted head with a potsherd. That patience turns to profound anger and a demand for answers in the following chapters, so anyone who thinks that Job was just a paragon of patience, or that virtue

only involves suffering in silence, has only read the first few chapters of Job. There are 40 chapters more.

At the end of a week where this nation has been riveted to the story of a single little girl who went missing on Monday, and was devastated on behalf of her family to hear that an abduction investigation has now become a murder enquiry, God's attitude in the story of Job seems altogether too nonchalant—and Job's response is not really human, unless you want to say that he's in shock and denial. But surely this cannot reflect the truth about God: surely the God we love and serve does not treat human beings like pawns in some sort of divine chess match!

But sometimes, the reality is that from our human perspective, it *feels* like God does. And the Book of Job is not so much a story *from* God *about* God, as it is a human story that attempts to say something, anything, about God and faith in the midst of extreme suffering, when it feels like everything that matters has been lost, with no comprehensible justification for it.

No one really knows when it was written, and the fact is, it doesn't really matter. Job isn't meant to be read as history: it's clearly a parable, written during a time of profound crisis when people were desperately trying to answer how or why extraordinary suffering and loss could be inflicted on good and faithful people. Crisis and devastating loss are not unique to a particular time and place: they visit every generation, and they don't just fall up on the wicked or those who seem to deserve to lose it all, which is why people of faith still struggle with the theological questions and attitudes that get put on display across the breadth of Job's story.

The fact that God barter over a man's life in order to prove a point with a figure called The Satan (the NRSV drops the article from his name, but it's there in the Hebrew every time) is what's most troubling. In order to read this, we need to understand something about The Satan character. First, although it's not known exactly when it was written, we do know that it was written before the notions of Satan as a demonic character developed. The Hebrew "ha-satan" actually means "The Adversary". And his role in the story is really to be one who presents a counter-point to God, a bit like a prosecuting attorney, so that God has to argue the case for Job: in the Job story, The Satan was a member of the heavenly court.

Throughout the Scriptures, it says time after time that God wants nothing more than to be in a genuine and mutual relationship with you and me. But if the only reason we respond to God's overtures for a relationship is because we have hope of gaining wealth or security, then it's not a genuine relationship—it's all a pretense, and faith in God is based on nothing more than a hope for gain.

So, the character of 'the Satan' becomes a rhetorical trope that's used to set up the larger question that the story itself is presenting, which is: Is it possible to love God just for being God, or is love for God always a result of a human desire for some sort of reward? Is an authentic and mutual relationship between God and humankind really possible?

Just as we contend or wrestle at times with every human relationship that really matters to us, authentic faith in God involves wrestling and struggle if it is fully engaged and real.

Jesus' disciples knew about the challenge of keeping it real and engaged. In our gospel lesson, they were trying to do the Teacher a favour by keeping the children away, only to get scolded. Children in those days were considered a bit of a nuisance at best—talking out of turn, saying awkward things, asking questions that made the grown-ups uncomfortable, not really contributing anything of great value so far as any of them could tell. So, the disciples were just following social custom, trying to show Jesus a bit of respect and honour by keeping the 'social nobodies'—the children—away from him.

But Jesus did what Jesus so often did: he turned common social customs on their ear, and taught everyone around him that the way the rest of the world values people and things isn't usually *God's* way of valuing people and things.

In the last verse of our Gospel lesson, we're told that after Jesus told off the disciples for misunderstanding the value of the children all around them, "he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and he blessed them" (Mark 10:16).

In addition to continuing the practice of wrestling with what the Scriptures say about God, and listening for what new and true thing God might be trying to say, the earliest church communities took up Jesus' practice of laying his hands on the heads of God's children, and blessing them. It's a practice that continues to this day—when we baptize infants, youth, or adults; when ministers and other leaders of the church are ordained; and when young people or adults make a public profession of faith or confirm their baptism. And it's a practice we're going to participate in, in a few minutes, as we continue the witness in faith, hope, and love.

As we prepare to bless and receive and celebrate over those who have heard and responded to the call of God in faith, remember that each one of us is called to the embrace life-enhancing challenge and joy of discipleship. It's not always easy, but in a world that is starved for meaning and yearning to feel satisfied, the life of faith that is fully engaged is meaningful and deeply satisfying. We become members of church families or communities when we recognise the ways in which journeying in faith with others helps to strengthen us and deepen our mutual understanding and experience.

As members of this community of faith in Wheatley, we are also members of a denomination that celebrates its 40th anniversary this week. But that's not all; we are members of a worldwide body of Christ, whose reach goes back in history more than two thousand years, back even before the time of Job, and will go forward into the future beyond our furthest vision.

Thanks be to the God who accompanied our ancient forebears in faith; and who is journeying with us—guiding and inspiring us now; and who will not fail to equip and draw new generations forward into the light and hope of Christian faith, world without end. Amen.

**Wheatley United Reformed Church
Order of Service
Sunday, 7 October, 2012
10 a.m.**

Lighting the Candle of Peace

Entrance of the Word and Worship Leaders

Welcome and Call to Worship:

Welcome to Wheatley United Reformed Church. And a very special welcome to any guests or visitors. We do hope you'll join us for the celebration we'll be enjoying after what will be a special service this morning; come and share a glass of bubbly, a cup of tea or coffee, or soft drink.

As we focus our eyes on the image that was created by Jan Richardson to aid us in our worship, let us now to be called to worship by these words she also wrote:

And the Table Will Be Wide

A Blessing for World Communion Sunday

And the table
will be wide.

And the welcome
will be wide.

And the arms
will open wide
to gather us in.

And our hearts
will open wide
to receive.

And we will come
as children who trust
there is enough.
And we will come
unhindered and free.

And our aching
will be met
with bread.
And our sorrow
will be met
with wine.

And we will open our hands
to the feast
without shame.

And we will turn
toward each other
without fear.

And we will give up
our appetite
for despair.

And we will taste
and know
of delight.

And we will become bread
for a hungry world.

And we will become drink
for those who thirst.

And the blessed
will become the blessing.

And everywhere
will be the feast.

~Jan Richardson

Hymn 663 'Love divine, all loves excelling' (tune 1)

Prayer of Invocation: (*Flames of the Spirit*, p. 72)

Gracious God, we gather this morning in this house of worship which, thanks to your love, is our home away from home. We come to add our human voices to the chorus of praise raised to you by wind and water and all life upon the land! We come as we are—distracted and weary, hopeful and open—knowing that you accept us and are ever mindful of our cares and joys. Still in us now the many voices that clamour for attention, that we might center ourselves upon you. Speak to us, Spirit of Life, in word and melody and quiet, that we may be renewed in our faith and strengthened in your service. This we ask in Christ's name. Amen.

Introduction to the Theme and Time with Children:

This is a special Sunday for a lot of different reasons. Do you children have any idea what one of the reasons might be?

1) New Members: some have been coming to the church for a long time, others not as long. But they all feel like they want to stand up and say in front of everyone and God, "I really love this church, and I want everyone to know that I promise to be supportive and faithful to what happens here."

2) New Elder being ordained: Joel

3) 40th Anniversary of the United Reformed Church: 05/10/1972

[Share Gen'l. Secy's./Roberta Rominger's Top 10 list.]

4) Worldwide Communion Sunday: special loaf of bread

That's a lot to celebrate! All of these celebrations are significant activities in our life together in this church. Some people think that churches are buildings—but they're not. Churches are the groups of people who come together inside the church buildings. And one of the many things that the people who get together in church buildings do is to pay attention to the ways that we live. The choices we make. How we pay attention to God, and what God wants for us and from us. And we try to help each other know what those things are, and remember that we want to get better and better at doing them.

Do you know where we get our instructions from about how God wants us to live? (The Bible.) The Bible is filled with stories and poems and letters that lots of people have written over thousands and thousands of years. And we read the Bible to try to understand what God is saying to us through all of these different people—because God uses peoples' stories to speak to us.

Most Sunday mornings, we listen to two or three short readings from the Bible—sometimes we call them our lessons. And sometimes those lessons can be hard to listen to, and hard to understand, even for grown-ups. This morning's lessons from the Book of Job, and the Gospel of Mark, are two that some grown-ups think are very hard to understand, partly because they say things that might make us confused about whether God really is as loving as we say, or whether what got written down might just not be the whole story.

Two very important things we should remember as we're listening to the readings are: 1) none of us understands things as well as God does—both of the lessons show how human beings make lots of mistakes about understanding what God wants; and 2) what's most important is that we keep trying to live in ways that love and honour God by showing love and respect to everyone else around us. Some people would describe this as "seeking God's kingdom first". We're going to sing a hymn about that now before Robert Harding comes to read those lessons. (And if the little children want to go to the crèche during the singing of it, this is a good time).

Hymn 512 'Seek ye first'

Readings from Scripture

Job 1:1, 2:1-10
Mark 10:2-16

Robert Harding**Sermon/Reflection****Tanya**

Leads into invitation to come and follow Jesus Christ, become a member of the family of faith. Elders, members.

Hymn 558 ‘Will you come and follow me?’**A Service of Confirmation: Kit Rasmussen**

Introduction
Proclamation of Faith: R&S 761 –
 The Nature, Faith, and Order of the U.R.C.
The Affirmations
Kit’s Statement/Testimony
The Promises: Kit’s promises, and the Congregation’s promise
The Confirmation
Welcome

Reception of further New Members:**Rebecca Bullard, Richard & Lynnette Wood**

Introduction
The Affirmation
The Welcome

Ordination and Induction of a New Elder: Joel Rasmussen

Introduction
Statement of Purpose
Affirmations
Ordination
Induction
Declaration of Ordination and Induction
Renewal of Commitment

Hymn 543 ‘Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us’**Invitation to Celebration to Worldwide Communion**

Come, people of God, having proclaimed your intention to maintain the unity of the Holy Spirit, you are invited with all those who seek the presence of Jesus Christ, to enter into that unity through the breaking of bread and the sharing of of wine. Come, confessing the sin that separates you from God and from one another. Any who wish to receive from this communion table are welcome, for the invitation comes from Christ Jesus himself, who turns no one away.

After our prayer of confession, we will sing together the Sanctus at number 13 in your hymnbook, and follow on from there with our communion prayers. When the elements of communion are shared, our custom here is to hold onto them until all have received, so that we might all eat and drink together.

Let us pray.

Prayer of Confession:

Eternal God of all people and places, we confess to you our lack of oneness with our human sisters and brothers as we begin this celebration of unity in Christ. We have closed our ears to voices of pain, and of wisdom, when they speak in accents other than our own. We have lacked the vision to see that people living in places we call foreign are as surely your children as we are. Our sensibilities are jarred even by the way our nearest neighbours express their faith in Christ. We cling to the pride of nation and denomination as if we had a special claim on truth and leadership.

Gracious God, forgive us, and renew a right spirit within us, a spirit of compassion, understanding, and humility. Fill us with the vision of unity in Christ, and enable us to incarnate Christ's love, so that we may worthily partake in the body of Christ and the wine of the new covenant. Amen.

Words of Assurance and Praise:

The good news in Christ is that God is more willing to forgive our sins than we are to acknowledge them. The God of peace be with you all, keeping you in unity with Christ's people everywhere, with whom we sing this ancient song of praise.

Sung Sanctus 13**Prayer of Thanksgiving and Consecration** (from Ruth C. Duck, *Bread for the Journey*, p. 13)

We give you thanks, O God, for the mighty sweep of your love, embracing all people and all nations. We thank you that you have sent Jesus Christ to us to break down the walls of hostility which divide the earth's people, and to reveal your all-encompassing love, making us all one. Through the power of your Spirit, may this unity become reality.

Now, by your presence, make sacred this feast in memory of Jesus Christ. As this broken bread was scattered like grain on the hillsides, and then, when gathered together, became one loaf, so may your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your eternal realm. Like Christ, who was offered up to you that we might live, and like this wine, which was poured out that all might share in the signs of new life, so may the lives of your people be poured out in compassion, and in solidarity with the poor, the oppressed, and the hungry of this world. For it is in the name of Jesus Christ, your Servant, that we pray. Amen.

Words of Institution

We remember that, the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'

In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'

As we gather around this table, preparing ourselves to receive the gifts he bequeathed to us, let us pray using the words that Jesus taught us:

Our Father, who art in heaven. . .

Sharing the Elements:

The bread which we break is the communion of the body of Christ.

The cup of blessing which we bless is the communion of the blood of Christ.

Gifts of God for the people of God. Receive them with humility and joy.

Take, eat; this is the bread of heaven in Christ Jesus.

This is the cup of salvation in Christ Jesus; let us drink in remembrance of him.

Prayer of Thanksgiving (from Ruth C. Duck, *Bread for the Journey*, p. 14)

God of new life, with joy we have received this sacrament of bread and wine, giving you thanks for Jesus Christ, our peace and our hope. Unite your church throughout the world in continuing Christ's ministry of love and servanthood, that your name may be praised in all the earth. Amen.

Invitation to Offering:

Having received of the gifts of Christ's table, we now offer gifts of our own so that the work of Christ Jesus might continue in the world. When the offerings have been received, we will sing the Doxology at number 21.

Prayer of Dedication:

Loving and faithful God, may these gifts we offer to you be offered and used in love and faithfulness: these gifts of treasure, talent, and time—the gifts we offer of our very lives. We continue our prayers as Liz leads us in thankfulness and intercession.

Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Ann Hardiman

Closing Hymn (for the Fortieth Anniversary of the URC, by Alan Gaunt)

Benediction

Postlude

The Word Precedes Us into the World

The United Reformed Church celebrates its 40th anniversary on Friday 5 October. Roberta Rominger, the URC's general secretary lists 15 things to celebrate about the URC at 40. Can you list more? What's your favourite thing about the URC?

1. We are a community constantly seeking the will of the Spirit, constantly seeking to grow in faith and understanding, full of wonderful people.
2. We believe in God's open welcome to all and strive to live what we believe.
3. We are free to craft worship as we feel led. Across the theological spectrum, our worship is regularly uplifting and challenging.
4. Our historical roots are inspiring. Lots of amazing stories to challenge us to be courageous and faithful.
5. We believe in the ministry of the whole people of God – women and men, old and young, lay and ordained, across the theological spectrum and many places of origin.
6. Ministers are called to churches. Very different from being appointed. Equality of stipend means that we give equal value to a wide range of callings.
7. We've been ordaining women for 95 years now.
8. Special category ministers show our commitment to mission beyond our local churches.
9. We still hold the ecumenical vision in our three nations and work hard to make it a reality.
10. Commitment for Life has enabled powerful support for Christian Aid.