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The Rev. Dr. William Seth Adams
Job 38.1-11

Blessed be the Name of God

This sermon is about loving God, risking whatever it takes to love God, and risking whatever it means to live and die in the love of God.

For a number of years in her life as a priest of the Church, my Amy spent lots of time in her hospital chaplaincy helping people in countless ways. Among her responsibilities was aiding people in completing all the documents that are needed to prepare for medical emergencies and to prepare for the end of life. Those documents are absolutely essential in the planning and provision of care. Those documents should be accomplished well in advance of whenever they are needed. The recent death and funeral for Trudy Campbell is a solid and pungent reminder of this necessity. [You should all have completed these documents and filed them properly. And you should know where they are!]

Trudy's recent passing and my remembrance of Amy's daily concerns in her chaplaincy, call to mind other kinds of end of life preparation, like funeral planning. Again, if you have plans or intentions for your own funeral, please discuss them with Nigel, write them down and file them with the office. That's what I'm in the midst of doing, writing out instructions for my funeral. Mind you, there's no besetting medical issue, so don't get concerned about that, it's just time to see to this. I have managed the choice of readings well enough and I have a notion as to who might do this or that. My stumbling place is the music.

I love to sing the Church's music and my love of the music is the primary impediment to my choosing the hymns. I want to set out way too much music, and some of the music is to my liking but may not necessarily be to the liking of the people who will actually sing the songs, when the time comes. I have confessed to you that my favorite hymn is Hymn 9 in the Hymnal 1982, but it's not so familiar to many. So what should I do? "Not here for high and holy things we render thanks to thee, but for the

common things of earth, the purple pageantry of dawning and of dying days, the splendor of the sea..." and so it goes. A perfect hymn for singing on Whidbey Island!

Well, if that's not quite right, what about my second on the list, Hymn 493, Charles Wesley's "O for a thousand tongues to sing my dear Redeemer's praise, the glories of my God and King, the triumph of his grace." That would doubtless put us on solid ground!

For the moment, and it may prevail in the end, my solution to this dilemma is to have a hymn sing at the wake, the night before the funeral. With David's good help, perhaps aided by his stalwart accordion, this idea helps me bring some order to the musical chaos that runs in my head, and would probably keep the funeral liturgy in proper bounds. Bishop Rickel will preach and I'm hopeful you'll all have a fine time, sort of.

When one goes through the hymns of the church and chooses favorites, some time it's because of the tune, but most of the time it's because of the words, the hymn text itself. And the more we read the texts, the more we learn about the richness and magnitude of the person of God. The more we read these texts, the more we discover the richness, the complexity of the person of God. The God given to us in Scripture and the God given to us in our own experience, this God is many faceted, richly diverse in character and more complex than we could every comprehend. This God extracts love from us because God is worthy, but God also extracts fear and trepidation and wonder. And this many faceted, complex God loves us without measure.

I offer you this fact, the complexity and the love of God, as we approach the marvelous reading from Job. This is one of the finest speeches in all of Scripture. And it explores, gloriously, one way that God has dealt with us, even the most righteous of us, poor Job. Here we see one form of the love of God.

This most righteous of souls, Job, has suffered extraordinary reverses in his life and fortune. And he has been counseled by several well-intended friends whose words soon became hollow and trite. For 37 chapters, Job has just sat there, as he will for another five chapters, mostly but not entirely listening! "The patience of Job" my mother used to say, and so it is. In one place, Job tries to think of all the things he might have done that could conceivably have prompted the Enemy and / or God to bring about his

downfall. But none of these imagined reasons is true of him. He is the most righteous of souls, “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil,” as he is described at the beginning of our story.

For 37 chapters, God too has just sat there, listening to all that Job and his fellows have had to say. Having heard enough, as chapter 38 begins, “Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind.” This is very serious, the voice and the whirlwind.

For those of you who imagine God would have a male voice, imagine James Earl Jones, Darth Vader [-or for that matter, our own Olof Sanders]. For my part, I like to imagine the voice of God having more the texture of Pearl Bailey. “Honey,” she would say, “Honey, listen here, where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?”

In whatever voice, the speech simply and eloquently takes Job to the ground, Job and everything that his friends have said, the voice of God from the whirlwind smashes them to the ground, vanquished. God, the LORD, is God, and you are not! That is the message. Sniping and cutting and complete.

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid the cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?”

For the next three chapters, God relentlessly asks the most strident and punishing questions. Ragging at Job about Behemoth and Leviathan, and everything else in all creation. Reminding Job over and over again, that God is God, and Job is not. Like a child with her nose pressed against a mirror, Job could only see the blur of it all, without focus or clarity.

His response was silence, and then a measured set of words, concluding “therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.”

I have never been fond of parental metaphors for God but here it is so easy to see what Job could not see. This explosion by God, this ranting and scolding and chiding, this extravagance is really an act of love, a love song, if you will, disguised. In a sense, you see, God’s love of Job here takes the form of sadness and rage, the way the love of a parent might express itself when a young person acts out or risks harm.

One might well want to argue that the whole of the story of Job is structured to set up this tirade by God. Job's apparent righteousness diverting Job's attention and the attention of his friends from the even greater righteousness of the Creator of All Things. By this reading, Job's fall would clear away from his line of vision all this presumed and earthly righteous distraction.

The love of God is boundless and given without merit. That is the truth.

Wendell Berry has written,

I stood and heard the steps of the city
And dreamed a lighter stepping than I heard,
The tread of my people dancing in a ring.
I knew that circle broken, the steps awry,
Stone and iron humming in the air.

But I thought even there, among the straying
Steps, of the dance that circles life around,
Its shadows moving on the ground, in rhyme
Of flesh with flesh, time with time, our bliss,
The earthly song that heavenly is.

[Song (3), *Collected Poems 1957-1982*, 261]

For years, before we moved to the Island, Amy and I would take our breakfast at least one weekday morning at a wonderful small Mexican restaurant in North Austin, very near our home. Joe and Norma knew what we would order and very often, they'd have it ready for us, at the counter, when we came in the door. One morning, sitting at our regular table, me deeply immersed in the sports page, Amy said, "It's really difficult to read the paper." I thought she said that because of the sunlight coming through the corner window. "No," she said, "it's not that. It's what's in the paper that makes it so hard."

Surely, that paper was no different than any other day's I suppose and what the paper has to report so often is so saddening. The kind of news the paper reports, of course, is old news to God. Violence, abuse, dishonesty, hurtfulness, tragedy, war and on and on. Certainly it tests the love of God! But no amount of sadness or rage or whatever else, can defeat that gracious love. The gracious love of God will stand, even to the end.

On Thursday, we thanked God for the grace shown to us in the life of Trudy Campbell. It was a good day, a good day to speak of the love of God. But every day is such a day for all of us, made as we are in God's image, male and female. The love of God, unbounded and freely given, even to Job.

As to my funeral hymns, which I hope not to set in motion anytime soon, I really haven't figured that out, but I will. I'll try to choose songs that will nourish your souls and make a proper remembrance of me. But more to the point, I hope the hymns, whenever they come, will lead you, draw you expectantly more deeply into the love of God, then as now. And for as long as there is, let that love give you life.

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