

Sermon Notes from CMJ
21st Sunday After Pentecost – Year B

RCL Readings – Job 38:1-7, 34-41; Psalm 104:1-9, 25, 37b; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45

ACNA Readings – Isaiah 53:4-12; Psalm 91; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:35-45

Introduction. I really like the book of Habakkuk where we find the prophet asking God questions. To question God is not inherently wrong if done with the right intention. As we will see, our lectionary passages deal with questioning God. There is a Jewish saying that says, ‘You are closer to God when you are asking questions than when you think you have the answers.’

Common Theme. Many of our readings ask questions of the Lord. Some questions are asked in ignorance and others in all honesty. God is not unaware of our personal situations and knows us intimately. His answers might not initially satisfy the question directly; however, we can be confident that our all-knowing God is in control.

Job 38:1-7, 34-41. The story in Job has been building up to this moment when the Lord speaks. Job has questions for God about the nature of his circumstances and suffering, and in reply God has questions for Job. God speaks from the midst of a storm or whirlwind. Why does God choose to approach Job in such a way? The Hebrew word for storm (*se'arah*) describes a moving mixture of light and darkness, wind and rain. Perhaps the whirlwind reflects a world in chaos from which God can still speak from and make his voice heard. In speaking to Job, the Lord doesn't really answer the questions Job asked. Nowhere does God explain why Job is suffering. God asks questions of Job concerning creation and the universe which Job cannot possibly fathom or answer. Modern science still ponders the questions that God raises: What is the foundation of matter, space and time? What does the expanding universe actually expand into? How do living things gain instincts? These are scientific questions that cannot be answered. The wisdom of God, his creative majesty and power sustaining the universe is beyond human understanding. Human knowledge and wisdom is limited, and this is a humbling lesson to acknowledge.

Psalm 104:1-9, 25, 37b. The traditional Hebrew text does not attribute the author of this psalm to anyone, while the Greek Septuagint and Latin Vulgate assign David as the composer. Some English versions begin the Psalm with ‘Praise the Lord’, when actually the text says, ‘Bless the Lord’. Blessings in the Bible are more than mere words; they are powerful and real. God blesses people, and we like it when he blesses us for the blessing is real. You can feel it, sense it and almost taste it. In the Scriptures, we see people bless other people, with many children seeking the blessing from their father (e.g., the blessing of Jacob over his sons). Times have changed. In our modern culture, most children would rather seek dad's car keys than his blessing. And thirdly, oddly enough, humans can also bless God. The phrase ‘Bless the Lord’ repeats itself throughout this psalm.

When Jewish people pray they wrap themselves in a prayer shawl called a *tallit*. On the collar is inscribed a verse from the Bible, and a popular one to inscribe is Psalm 104:2 where God wraps himself with light. Light is an important symbol in the Scriptures. Light in the Bible is not the same as the light

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we experience from a candle or lightbulb. The creative light spoken on day one of creation is not the same as the light from the sun and moon on day four. God's light is something much more and is often paired with God's salvation. Consider 'The Lord is my light and my salvation' (Ps 27:1), and 'Arise, shine, for your light has come' (Isa 60:1). God clothes himself in this salvific light, and the invisible becomes wrapped in something visible. While we cannot see God, we can see him through his actions of creation, redemption and blessing. The psalm notes that nothing has happened by chance. It was God who laid the foundations of the earth, letting us know creation had a cause. It was God who brought the light into existence. The psalm ends with the imperative to 'Praise the Lord', which is the word *halleluyah*, the first psalm to do so. One of the ways to bless God is through true and heartfelt worship and praise.

Hebrews 5:1-10. The Levitical priesthood was established in Exodus and given specific functions in Leviticus through Moses at the instruction by God. The writer of Hebrews does not disparage the priesthood; actually, his depiction is entirely positive describing it as an 'honour' from the Lord. The high priest has 'compassion' on the wayward since he shares in and can identify with their 'weaknesses'. The weakness of the high priest is illustrated through the personal sacrifice for his own sins before he can officiate at the sacrifice for the sins of the people. Like the high priest, Jesus was also appointed by God, although to a different priesthood, to the order of Melchizedek. This is a quote from Psalm 110 and refers to the mysterious encounter between Abram (Abraham) and the king of Salem in Genesis 14:18-20. Very little is written about Melchizedek in the Bible, barely 4 lines in Genesis 14. This lack of information led to much speculation on the person, function and role of this king-priest during the Second Temple Period. The Dead Sea community interpreted Melchizedek to be the messiah and even divine in the Melchizedek Scroll (Dead Sea scroll 11Q13). The Levitical priesthood, with its attachment to the temple, could only function for so long and was bound by location and human frailty. The order of Melchizedek does not have those restrictions and is an everlasting priesthood. Hebrews emphasizes that Jesus learned obedience through suffering. That might seem a strange thing to say, that even though Jesus was and is God, he learned obedience. That is not to say that Jesus went from a state of disobedience to being obedient. Rather, it was through the human suffering of Jesus, in obeying his father, that he was able to accomplish redemption. Verse 9 concludes with our appropriate response to the redemption won for us by the Messiah, which is obedience and not solely belief. He has become the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

Mark 10:35-45. On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus is asked a question. The disciples still thought that when Jesus arrived in the holy city he would overthrow the Romans and establish a physical messianic kingdom. John and James ask Jesus for high-status positions alongside what they assumed would be a literal throne. In the parallel account in Matthew 20:20-28, it is their mother who asks the question of Jesus on their behalf. It seems the disciples are still talking about who is the greatest amongst themselves from Mark 9:33-34. Instead of answering their question directly, Jesus asks questions of his own to the brothers. He also takes the opportunity to gather the other disciples and teach about leadership in the

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Kingdom of Heaven. It is humble service that is the hallmark of leadership in the community, modelled through the life and service of the Messiah himself. Seeking to rule over the community should not be the goal or desire of a shepherd of the Church. Shepherds should place the priority of the flock before themselves. Jesus declares openly that the Son of Man walks to Jerusalem, not as a conqueror but to ‘give his life as a ransom for many’. This type of atonement language may actually have been familiar to many in late antiquity. In the apocryphal book 4 Maccabees 6:28-29, we read of the account of the martyrdom of Eliezer the priest under the hand of the Greek Seleucids. As Eliezer dies he says, ‘Be merciful to your people, let our punishment suffice for them. Make my blood their purification and take my life in exchange for theirs’. Jesus and the Gospels speak openly. The question is do we hear?

ACNA Readings

Isaiah 53:4-12. Jesus clearly fits the image of the suffering servant presented by the prophet Isaiah. The servant is afflicted by God but also exalted by the Lord through his obedience. Skeptics and opponents of the Christian faith often argue that Christianity ‘forces’ passages and prophecies in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) onto the person of Jesus and that Jewish people never interpreted the Bible the way Christians do. Reading through Second Temple period Jewish literature and the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has quietly disproved that argument. The books of Maccabees describe righteous martyrdom for the expiation of the sins of others. The Jewish community at Qumran in the century before Jesus wrote much about their own messianic expectations. They composed several Thanksgiving Hymns (1QH_a) to the messiah, and they bear striking resemblance to the Christian view of the suffering servant who is also exalted in the heavenly realms. Hymn 1 reads:

I shall be reckoned with the angels, my dwelling is in the holy council. Who has been despised like me? and who has been rejected of men like me? And who compares to me in enduring evil? No teaching is like my teaching for I sit in heaven. Who is like me among the angels?

As we read and ponder the work of the Messiah through the words of the prophet Isaiah, we can have confidence that the Lord has indeed laid on Jesus the ‘iniquity of us all’ for ‘we all like sheep have gone astray’. The Father has judged our iniquity, through the faithfulness of the Son, and now we are truly free.

Psalms 91. The author of this psalm remains anonymous, although the Septuagint ascribes the prayer to King David. The psalm is a powerful prayer of assurance in the protection and comfort of God. The opening verse, along with Psalm 27:5 and 31:20, describe a ‘secret place’ that God has for himself in heaven. God delights to share that space with us and invites people to ‘dwell’ with him there. Those that respond to the call will find themselves under the care and protection of the Living God. The secret place is not a physical structure, nor something mystical and reserved only for wise philosophers and

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super-spiritual people. The secret place is built on a personal relationship with the Lord where the worshipper personally identifies God as ‘My God’ and places solid trust in him. This does not mean that those who have faith in God will never encounter troubles. The psalmist describes various disasters and destructions that could occur at any time. Many faithful followers of Jesus have fallen victim to plagues and persecutions. The psalm describes the confidence that the believer can have through all of the dangers and challenges there are in the world. Interestingly, Satan quotes several verses of this psalm when tempting Jesus (Matt 4:1-11). Satan quotes Psalm 91:11-12 to try and get Jesus to demonstrate his divinity as the Son of God while standing on the temple. If angels had indeed come to rescue Jesus, then this would have been an amazing testimony to the many Jewish worshipers in the temple area. Jesus denounces the temptation as testing God, and these are certainly verses taken out of context by the Devil. The psalm does not encourage us to put ourselves in harm's way unnecessarily, looking for angelic intervention.

Hebrews 4:12-16. The Word of God is alive and active. The ‘Word’ here could be both the Holy Scriptures and also the Word of the Living God. Both are alive and active. The words of God are incredibly powerful. When God spoke at Mount Sinai, the Israelites could not bear it and asked Moses to intercede and speak to the Lord on their behalf. When reading the Bible, the Word of God exposes to us the fallen human condition and reveals our need for redemption. Truth is not an easy commodity to come by in our modern world; however, God’s Word reveals the truth of human history and of ourselves, too. Even if we don’t want to see it! The Hebrew Bible records a few righteous characters ascending to heaven, such as Enoch (Gen 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kgs 2:1-12). Here, the author of Hebrews writes that Jesus has also ascended into heaven without providing any of the details surrounding his death and resurrection. Hebrews notes that now ‘everything is laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account’. Initially this might seem like a very scary thought. Yet, we are urged to approach the throne of grace with confidence. Why? Because the one before whom we stand to give account is one who shares our humanity and can sympathize with our weakness. He knows intimately the human need for redemption, and he can provide it. The Judge and the judgment are real, but so are the mercy and grace that can be found in the risen Messiah.

About the author. The Rev. Aaron Eime is the deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied in the master’s program at Hebrew University with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied psychology and sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek and is fluent in German and Hebrew. He has taught internationally, including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.