

Experiencing God
Job 23:1-17, (Mark 10:17-31)
21st Sunday After Pentecost
October 14, 2018
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Job 23:1-9 (NRSV) Job Replies: My Complaint Is Bitter

23 Then Job answered:

2 “Today also my complaint is bitter;^[a]
 his^[b] hand is heavy despite my groaning.

3 Oh, that I knew where I might find him,
 that I might come even to his dwelling!

4 I would lay my case before him,
 and fill my mouth with arguments.

5 I would learn what he would answer me,
 and understand what he would say to me.

6 Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power?
 No; but he would give heed to me.

7 There an upright person could reason with him,
 and I should be acquitted forever by my judge.

8 “If I go forward, he is not there;
 or backward, I cannot perceive him;

9 on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him;
 I turn^[c] to the right, but I cannot see him.

I accomplished a study, several years ago, called Experiencing God, by Henry Blackaby. It was a challenging study, but I recall wondering “what do I expect out of an experience of God?”

What emotions are triggered when that happens?

What do you think?

What do YOU think or feel when YOU experience God?

I think that *whatever* words name in our heads we have to include some assumptions, some expectations and a bit about the past experiences you've had of God's Presence in your life. You BEING HERE right now, says something, too. We come here on Sunday mornings hoping to experience God; hoping to meet Jesus.

Our previous encounters (would you call them meetings?) with God hold us up though, don't they, through the bumps of life and on our journey of faith.

But, here's a second element: These hopes and experiences ALSO shape how we share our faith with others.

Now, Mr. Blackaby's study aside, I don't think there is any one source – a book or a sermon, music or poetry that can answer the question: "HOW do you experience God?"

So, as we should, for the more challenging questions, let's head to Scripture for some answers. Let's look at a few passages in God's Word to explore what it means to encounter God.

We avoid the book of Job don't we? When's the last time you opened your Bible and said, "I'm gonna read some Job!" No, we usually think, "THAT is a heck of a depressing book!" Or that it's TOO much of a challenge?

Perhaps, THOSE ARE the places we SHOULD start!

In today's passage, which you will hear more of next Sunday, we get the feeling like God is playing hide'n'seek!

Job says,

*"If I go forward, he is not there;
or backward, I cannot perceive him;
on the left he hides,
and I cannot behold him;
I turn to the right,
but I cannot see him."*

God is elusive and hidden.

See, because of Job's suffering he wants to find God and ask some questions! "Why am I suffering?" And, "what have I done?"

Ever wanted to ask those questions of God?

Yep. We have.

Often we ask, in the midst of a difficult time "What have I done to deserve this?" Or, maybe we've judged difficulties that are happening to somebody else and say something like: "They made their own bed now they have to lie in it."

But THAT'S – I'm telling you lovingly - self-righteous!

If we look for comfort in bad things happening to folks we disagree with...
...or are elated that something bad is already set in place to happen TO them when they behave poorly, we better examine OUR motives!

As HARD AS IT MAY BE we'd better recall the hard things Jesus did for me and you. We'd better remember that Jesus walked beside, and among, those who were suffering.

I personally think even the Pharisees were suffering because of their misguided authority!

So, in light of Jesus' mighty acts (do you remember hearing these words in the Communion liturgy last Sunday)in remembrance of his mighty works, we'd better start to care for our relationships and responsibilities towards THOSE who ARE suffering – in whatever circumstance. The liturgy continues, “we offer OURSELVES in praise and thanksgiving.” Remember?

I get it. I KNOW it: Life is hard and complex.

God put Job's story in the “family album” so that we could learn and talk about the tough things.

‘Cause, and you need to listen here, ‘cause God isn’t about reward and punishment in the moments when harsh things happen to people.

Be clear – Job wants to meet with God because he’s got questions.

Plus, the poor guy has to deal with not-so-sympathetic friends AND NOT being able to find God.

IF, and I mean a big IF, we were trying to answer “How do I experience God?” based on the moments in Job's life (or when ours feel *like* Job's,) we might get caught up with answers that include (much like Job's friends did) punishment and suffering, absence and questioning, confusion and fear.

How do you experience God?

I don't know about you, but THOSE words (that I just listed) are NOT the ones I strive to use in our journey of faith and in witnessing to others.

Do those words match up to the ones you noted earlier when I asked you “How?”

Then, we have the Gospel Lectionary reading for today, which we didn't read, but is about Jesus' encounter with the wealthy young man.

Remember now, that when Jesus is talking to someone in Scripture, he may as well be talking to us.

And when he IS talking, he's relaying ***God's message, God's words*** to us.

You can probably remember the story.

A young man comes to Jesus.

The another gospel writer call him the rich young ruler and I've always wondered if it was a "young," rich Nicodemus.

Anyway, he comes and Jesus starts asking him questions.

His responses give a thumbs up; that the guy is doing the right things following God's commandments.

This young man *may* have been seeking to experience affirmation AND HE GOT IT.

He could be us, sometimes, when we seek God for a word of confirmation; an "atta boy/girl." We want to hear that what we're doing is right on.

Yet, if you'll recall, Jesus does affirm him, but then pushes further "*You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.*"

That isn't an "atta boy/girl!"

That's confrontational!

How many of us have sold *everything* to give it to the poor and then followed Jesus?

Not me. Not everything.

I'm inspired when I read about folks who HAVE....but...

And then, we know, the young PERSON turns away.

How do we experience God?

If we left it here and reflected on what words we could come up with NOW, we might say: questioning, confrontation, disruption, confusion.

And I'll add: hope.

Hope.

The words in Mark, in today's particular reading, close (after a camel not getting through the eye of a needle) with: "*For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.*"

In the book of Hebrews we can read, "*Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword*" and that's clear this morning. We've explored the differences that come up in an opportunity to experience God. There could be mystery and confrontation and confusion, but there is also affirmation and peace and comfort.

And yet, whatever our experience of God **has been**, there's this: God' closeness. When we think God is hidden or we're "feeling" God's presence in a particular way, we CAN BE SURE **God knows us intimately AND God cares for us.**

God cares for us so deeply that Jesus came to share in our lives.

Jesus came to die, so he could return to God's presence and be our great high priest, it says in Hebrews.

And, he is the conduit for us, between God and us.

For me, THAT'S a hope-filled comfort.

Now, I'm not claiming more than to say that my understanding of God will always be limited.

That's one of MY "experience God" words! "LIMITED."

But, another idea is this.

Even though my understanding IS limited, I know that God's love for me **isn't**.

And I also know that God's love isn't determined by a particular moment, positive OR negative, in **my** life. **And, Dear Ones, it's the same for you.**

That gives us hope.

That can undergird us to seek to experience God again and again.

...to seek God even when it feels like hide-n-seek...

When, I went back to re-read the cover of Mr. Blackaby's book and study guide, I noted that he wrote we should search for where God is working and join in the work.

When we join God, we WILL BE equipped, given the gifts God needs us to have, to get the job done.

I think that a foundational JOB God is in the middle of is RELATIONSHIPS.

Not just WITH God, but with each other...and others we don't know yet.

Some relationships are easier than others. Amen?

Sometimes it would be easier to *move on* than do the hard work of resolving conflicts; of doing some SELF-reflection; and of forgiveness.

But, sometimes, EASY undermines God's work and we lose – as much or more than the situation or person we're walking away from.

And I understand: our relationship with God **is** work; good at some times **and** difficult at others. I'm going to go with: Experiencing God is GOOD work!

How do YOU experience God?

How can you join God in the work of **experiences**?

Wherever you find yourself on your walk of faith...with God all things are possible. The possibilities of God are the possibilities we encounter in Jesus. Those are the things we can share with someone else – the "how's" of experiencing God.

Jesus came to serve and save us...

....to teach us about bringing healing and mercy

...Jesus IS God 's love and grace

...and the one we are supposed live like.

Living with integrity, in Christ's example, is going to include the bumps and bruises (or open sores like Job had.)

We're **called** to be in community and together we face brokenness and we navigate with other broken people.

Be sure to know, too, that the promise of HOPE does NOT make light of or ignore our life experiences.

It brings us INTO AN EXPERIENCE of (and with) God that puts ALL our experiences into the context of a bigger story...and then, whatever we're encountering includes our big God and God's BIG love that will lead to renewal of all things in Christ.

The Apostle Paul described it as "a hope in things not (yet) seen".

Praise God for the bigger story. Amen!