

"GODISNOWHERE"

Job 42:1-6; Mark 9:33-41

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

September 21, 2014 – 15th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

One of challenges of teaching, I found, was not to come to a hasty assessment of your students. Even when you don't set out to do this, it just seems to come so naturally.

Take, for example, how quickly one can form an opinion from the very first time a student responds in class. If the answer is correct, and presented in a clear and responsive manner, you're apt to conclude that this is going to be a good student. If the answer is wrong, but makes sense, then you figure she'll be about average—maybe B or C material. On the other hand should you call on a student and he sits there totally dumfounded, you begin to suspect that you're in for a long year. The only problem is that first impressions don't always prove to be true in the long run.

Now perhaps some might question me on the title for the morning sermon, wondering if there is an error in printing. The letters all seem to run together but, on closer look, you'll discover there are words imbedded there. While I won't ask for a show of hands, I wonder how many of you saw it to say, "God Is Nowhere?" That's certainly not anything positive to preach on. But does anyone see another possibility in this combination of letters?

"God Is Now Here" is totally different from the other interpretation. Actually, that is my intended title. So why did I have it written in this form without spacing? Because it illustrates a characteristic of human behavior: we're usually very quick to surmise things and most often do it from the negative side. God is nowhere. God is now here. Two very different messages from the same exact letters.

In this morning's Old Testament lesson we find that Job acted in the way that most people would. When he was first afflicted with his pain and suffering, he gave the quick human response: God must be nowhere. It wasn't until the last part of the story, particularly in today's reading from the final chapter, that Job came to a new understanding.

"Then Job answered the Lord: 'Therefore I uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know ... I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see you; therefore... I repent in dust and ashes.'" Job's former cry of desperation, his feeling of abandonment, was now changed to an affirmation of faith-- God is now here. Job went from disillusion to illumination. Circumstances may not have changed, but his whole outlook was altered; and that made all the difference for him.

You remember the story of Job. It's the tale of a good man who seemingly suffers total disaster. He loses all of his children and property, and is afflicted with a terrible disease. The friends of Job explain his suffering in simple, conventional terms. They say that since God always rewards good and punishes evil, Job's distress can only mean that he has sinned greatly.

But even Job, with all his pain, does not fall for this easy explanation. He knows he doesn't deserve such harsh punishment because he has been an unusually good and righteous man. He is mystified how God can let so much evil happen to someone like him. So he boldly challenges the Lord. Job doesn't lose his faith, but he does long to be justified before God. He wishes to regain his honor and reputation as a good man. He cries out, "Let God weigh me on honest scales, and he will see how innocent I am."

God doesn't give Job a direct answer to his question of why he is suffering, but does chastise him for challenging the way the world has been divinely created. God reacts to Job's all-knowing attitude by saying, "Are you trying to prove that I am unjust-- to put me in the wrong and yourself in the right?"

"Who are you to question my wisdom? Were you there when I made the world? If you know so much, tell me about it. Who decided how large it should be? Who laid the cornerstone of the world? Do you know all the answers? Job, have you ever in all your life commanded a day to dawn? Can you guide the stars season by season? Does a hawk learn from you how to fly?"

Finally Job concludes that there is much he cannot and will not know about the heavenly plan. His mind is not big enough to grasp the full reality. In the end Job is forced to acknowledge his limitations and left to affirm God's goodness even when life makes no apparent sense. What Job learns is this: faith, ultimately, is belief that is not limited by human comprehension. It needs to remain strong even though we don't always understand and our questions go unanswered.

We humans so easily jump to conclusions. Like the friends of Job who were convinced that God was punishing him because of his sins, or Job himself who surmised that God must be misinformed about him, we also rush in most of the time to form our quick opinions. Often we end up acting on those hasty judgments.

I recently came across this little story in a magazine. The woman who wrote it said this: "One day last May our children brought in a freshly laid duck egg a neighbor boy had given them. Naturally the kids wanted to hatch it and they begged until I told them we would try.

The house was chilly and the furnace had already been turned off for the year, so the only spot that was warm enough was the pilot light on the top of the stove. We found a piece of flannel, wrapped the egg in it, put it in one of my cooking pots with the lid on, and set it beside the pilot light. And there it sat for three weeks while I worked around it.

"After the third week passed it was getting on my nerves to constantly have that pot in my way. And my husband complained that it smelled funny and was surely rotten. By that time the kids were bored with it as well. So, in the fourth week, I told one of the boys to take it outside and get rid of it.

"He didn't just take it out and put it in the trash as I thought he would; instead, he broke it open in the yard. He cried out for us to come and look. Then we were all horrified to see that it contained a still living and almost fully developed duckling, complete with feathers and web feet. All we could do was watch it with sorrow, for it could not possibly survive yet on its own. We found sadly that we had acted in haste."

Today our other scripture reading is likewise one of those rushes to judgment. In it the disciples report proudly to Jesus that they acted to stop a person who was attempting to perform healing in their Master's name. But Jesus replies unexpectedly, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us."

Perhaps to the disciples it seemed obvious that Jesus would have condemned the man, but that is not the case. Instead of being congratulated, the disciples are rebuked because their actions weren't in accord with Christ's will. Jesus tells them to back off and, in essence, take a wait-and-see attitude. Time would show the man's sincerity or his false act.

We get so sure of ourselves. We decide what fits in one situation and then try to apply it across the board in every similar one. We stereotype people because of their race or their background or their education, and don't give them a chance to show themselves for who they really are. These categories are convenient as a shorthand way of disposing of people. We don't have to think more deeply or give any more time to those whom we are able to prejudge. You have to admit it makes life easier.

We elevate certain folks because of some characteristic we affirm, and demote others for the opposite reason. We want to make the complex simple and get on to the next thing. We're enamored with jumping to conclusions—about others, about situations, and, yes, even about God. Our scriptures for this morning give us a word of warning about this foolishness. The Bible tells us that some things just take time, no matter what our agenda is. Some things cannot be understood, regardless of our desire to know. Some judgments are rash and prone to error.

A favorite movie of mine is *Tender Mercies*. It's about Mac Sledge, a country and western singer who has hit the skids. He drank too much, his career went bust, his marriage fell apart. As the film begins he has pretty much become a bum.

But then, purely by coincidence, he meets a woman, a widow with a young son. She gives him a few days' work, and slowly things begin to come together for Mac. He quits drinking. He marries the woman and becomes a real father to the boy. He starts writing songs and begins to sing again. He even joins the church and gets baptized.

As he leaves church after getting immersed, Mac is asked if he feels any different. The question is posed because it seeks a certain answer. There's pressure on Mac to come to a quick judgment that will yield a positive answer, the one that everyone would like to hear. Instead he says honestly, "Not yet."

His reply doesn't cut off future possibilities, but it doesn't claim something that isn't. If there is to be real change, Mac knows that it requires some time in coming. Some things just can't be hurried. Some things are better left to God's time than to our time, even if we don't understand the delay.

It's a sign of growth in faith when we stop imposing our timeline on life or condition belief upon getting what we want. When we begin to understand this, we begin to mature as Christians. The Bible tells us that some things just take time, no matter what our agenda may be. Some things cannot be understood, regardless of our desire to know.

When we're going through troubled times, when everything seems to run together, then we especially need to be aware of the temptation to cry out "God is nowhere" and replace it instead with the true affirmation: "God is now here." And God will see us through.