

The Great Paradox Psalm 91:9-16 Mark 10:35-45 Rev. Brian Bagley-Bonner

Some people think the role of religion is to answer the difficult questions of life with absolute certainty. Questions like, “where do we go when we die? What is the purpose of life? How do we know we are following God's will? Who will give us the truth of God? Why is there suffering. Some faiths are very willing to comply with this desire, giving such absolute answers often after much debate, much struggle and more often than we wish, much violence. But if we take our Holy Scriptures seriously and as a whole, we will see that they resist giving absolute answers. Both the Hebrew Scriptures which we share with Judaism, and are our own Greek Testament are records of the dialogue of God's people around all important questions. In spite of that, many people of faith are willing to declare with certainty, “the Bible says, ‘such and such’” to prove that their answers are absolute and God’s answers. Most of the time, in the search to make faith easy and make themselves God’s spokespeople, they ignore any Biblical passages that give another answer,

It is an easy thing to do and we all do it. But most are not honest about it. One of the reasons we in the Industrial Western Civilization think life and faith, like everything is a problem to be solved. We think like inventing Thomas Edison inventing the incandescent light bulb if we work long enough we will find THE right answers to life’s questions. But our scientific and technological success cannot be translated to the great spiritual mysteries of life. The Hindu philosopher, and statesman, Sir Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan who was instrumental in introducing Eastern thought says something very different."Religion is not a movement stretching out to grasp something, external, tangible and good, and to possess it. It is a form of being, not having, a mode of life. Spiritual life is not a problem to be solved but a reality to be experienced. It is new birth into enlightenment." He makes clear that there are no absolute answers we can possess, but only a mystery to be lived out.

One of the most amazing thing about the scriptures is they address almost any situation for an individual or a people or a nation. In different times in history God's people wrestle with these questions choosing some answers over others. This is what makes the

them so amazing. Today's Scriptures are an excellent example of this. First we read the Psalm where we see the belief that God blesses us when we are faithful with abundance and peace as well as joy. This stream of belief is strong in scripture and is why the disciples in last week's scripture could not understand why Jesus suggests a rich person would have a hard time attaining the kingdom of heaven. This life of abundance and peace is, probably what most of us hope for in life. And in different times and places, this is how lesser with peaceful and lives where we get all we need. This is a truth, reflected in the phrase doing well by doing good which some business people use today. And we know we cannot reverse the order. You can be rich and satisfied and not be at all concerned about God. But wealth is not the only indicator of what our lives might look like if we are faithful to God. In today's Gospel Jesus presents a different model for a different time. Following last week's encouragement to the disciples that their Life of sacrifice would be abundantly rewarded, Jesus again reverses the culture's paradigm by telling them in today's gospel that they must not seek a life of being served, but one of true service. So which is it, are we called to live a life of service? Or are we to live our life faithfully and expect God's blessing? As my old Hebrew scripture Professor used to say when we post such questions, "yes. " And to add to our dialogue, these two answers of how we should live join other answers in Scripture. Answers offered by the prophets when they call the people to repentance, to changing their ways. At other times the people are called to flee, to run, to escape - the Exodus is such an event. Sometimes the people are called to seek out to conquer, and to overcome. In the Apocalyptic Books of Daniel and the Revelation of John we see a time when the faithful die for their faith.

In spite of what some say, our Bible is not a rule book for how to live THE one faithful life, but is instead a palette that gives us images of how many people have tried to be faithful to God over the millennia in many different times and places. Like all people before us and after, our task is to determine what it means to be God's people here and now, in this time and place. It is not easy to do this, and sometimes we would prefer just a short list

of does and don'ts – but scripture does not give us this option, oh there are plenty of humans who will give us this option, but not scripture and not God. No we must use these many images as colors to paint our own canvas - to create our spiritual faithfulness, both as individuals and as a congregation. And in our lives we will experience times of great blessing as the Psalmist describes, and times when we must follow Jesus teaching and example and put ourselves as secondary and serve others, whether they be close family, or oppressed peoples, or escaping refugees. As we explore the scriptures in study and worship, how does God seem to be speaking to you? What compelling images keep coming to you in different ways? These may be showing you the path ahead.

But always remember that “the spiritual life is not a problem to be solved but a reality to be experienced.” One of the most ancient scriptures we shared today from the book of Job reminds us of this. It is a long dialogue between Job and three friends with God coming in at the end. It is a deep exploration of why bad things happen to good people. Horrible things befall Job, not by God's hand but as a result of Satan being given free reign to make Job suffer through destruction of his wealth and family. The three friends offer no real help to Job saying to him “you must've done something to displease God to have all these horrible things happen – ask God's forgiveness!” But Job knows this is not the case, and in his frustration eventually says God has been ungracious to him. And then God answers Job with the words we spoke earlier in our time for meditation- words which remind us that life is a mystery beyond our ability to understand it. A clergy friend boils down the whole book of Job into "I am God, and you are not! – Get over yourself." Which may seem a bit drastic but it points us to the fact that life is mysterious and difficult to understand and the world as we know it is not set up to be fair or balanced. Good deeds do not always result in good outcomes, nor do evil deeds lead to bad outcomes. The world is a Mystery and at the heart of it all we can do the best we can and trust the ultimate outcome to the Gracious One at the Heart of the Universe.

To close this meditation I remind us of another familiar part of scripture that shows us that life has many paths and choices, Ecclesiastes 3:

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

Psalm 91:9-16

Because you have made God your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place,
no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent.

For God will command God's angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.

On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.

You will tread on the lion, and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.

Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name.

When they call to me, I will answer them;

I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them.

With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation.

Mark 10:35-45

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."