

Leacock Presbyterian Church, Paradise, PA  
Richard E. Sindall, Guest Minister  
Scripture Lessons: Exodus 2:23-25 and Mark 1:9-11,14-15,40-45  
July 14, 2024

## SAYS WHO?

Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my thoughts.  
See if there is any hurtful way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting.

Wow! Does that not sound like a precarious prayer, downright dangerous if I take it seriously and especially if God takes it seriously? Is it not safer and more reasonable when I pray to ask God to shield me from harm, accept me as I am unconditionally, and grant me that blissful combination of security and prosperity, of health and wealth? Who asks to be tested? Do I want my silent thoughts to be known and searched?

Psalm 139, from which our Call to Worship this morning is taken, has been called a “hymn to God’s omniscience,” but I don’t believe that label to be accurate and certainly neither reassuring nor helpful. I am not comforted by believing God knows all about me, even the self-knowledge I try to hide from myself, until I hear and start to believe the much deeper truth of God: not merely that God has all the information but much more importantly that God cares. That is the important truth of this psalm. Only when I trust God to be understanding and caring will I ask this compassionate God to search me and know my heart.

Classical philosophy’s all-knowing, all-seeing, all-powerful, all-everything deity is cold, hard, and far above my trusting, let alone loving. Philosophic love for God is just adoration for power and greatness. But ironically, the all-powerful, all-knowing, everywhere-present God is very easy to dismiss from day-to-day living. Be respectful, drop off my praises and my offerings, but then get on with my life, because such a god doesn’t really care personally about me anyway.

The second chapter of Exodus concludes strangely. It seems just to stop without finishing the sentence, and translators scramble to complete the thought in English. We read that the Israelites were groaning under the weight of their oppression. Their cry rises to God, then suddenly we are told, “and God knew.” That’s it. We wonder what’s missing: “and God knew” what? Our translation reads, “and God took notice of them.” That’s okay but weak. In the Bible, truly to know means to feel, understand, and care. God is not gathering data; God is entering into the misery and desperation of the Israelite slaves.

That God knows the pain of the oppressed means that God is with them in their oppression, and it tells us something is going to happen. Their liberation is coming. The living God is about to break into human history to adopt the lowest of the low, to be there for and with the scorned and

powerless. No wonder Egypt's pharaoh is unimpressed, he who fancies himself a son of the high gods. But from here on out, the Creator of the universe will be self-identified as the God of slaves, outcasts, and nobodies in the world.

Now we come to Jesus as he is confronted by a very impertinent leper, an outcast. He is a man it's allowable and even righteous to scorn. To the teachers of his people, his leprosy identifies him as deservingly outside the circle of God's caring or their own pity.

Brazenly, this shameful man challenges Jesus: "If you are willing . . ." he says. Not, "If you are able." He does not doubt God's power, and apparently he does not doubt Jesus truly represents God's will, but the man is not so sure God will care about him. It is that doubt about God's compassion the man shoves into the face of Jesus.

Our reading tells us Jesus is moved to pity, but some of the ancient manuscripts of Mark say rather he is moved to anger. The very nature and will of God are on trial. What is God's will? What is God's truth?

Let me read you something that perhaps borders on blasphemy but, I think, punctures the comfort of the comfortable and the piety of the pious. This is Louis Untermeyer's poem, "Caliban in the Coal Mines." I ask you to consider how many people might speak to God this way if they dared.

God , we don't like to complain  
—We know that the mine is no lark—  
But—there's the pools from the rain;  
But—there's the cold and the dark.

God, You don't know what it is—  
—You, in Your well-lighted sky,  
Watching the meteors whizz;  
—Warm, with the sun always by.

God, if You had but the moon  
—Stuck in Your cap for a lamp,  
Even You'd tire of it soon,  
—Down in the dark and the damp.

Nothing but blackness above  
—And nothing that moves but the cars—  
God, if You wish for our love,  
—Fling us a handful of stars!

Bitter? Resentful? Yes. Irreverent? Perhaps irreverent, but frank and – dare we say? – honest with God.

Jesus responds, "I am willing; be made clean!" Jesus has come to take the heat for God, to go down into the cold and the darkness. He has come to show us that God, the Creator and Lord of universe, wills to be with us and be especially with the disregarded, the shamed, the people who are treated like cattle. He has come to be with and for those who have lost regard for themselves but cry out, perhaps silently, "Where is God for me, for us, for people like me?"

Jesus does not explain to the man how his leprosy manifests God's will and why he should accept it as God's will. God does not send Moses back down to Egypt to teach the Israelites to accept their place and be good, hardworking, submissive slaves. No, Moses is sent to tell power that the God of the slaves demands, "Let my people go!" Who says so? That's pharaoh's dismissive question. *Moses and Aaron, tell the slaves to get back to work, and I think I'll give them more work so they stop listening to you troublemakers..*

Says who? Who says God hears, understands, feels, and cares? Who says God enters into our human fear, shame, and near-despair. Who says God understands our weakness even we when hide it from ourselves?

*Where can I go from your spirit, where can I flee from your presence? If I ask darkness to cover me, and the light about to become night, the darkness will not be dark to you. Even there your hand will hold me.*

I believe and have needed to believe that even the darkness of dementia that removes people we love from us while their lungs yet breathe and their hearts still pump blood is not too dark for God to find them and be with them. I have trusted God to hold on to them when we no longer can and to keep them for us until all that hurts and destroys is finally gone.

Jesus, in his living, healing and teaching became for us the response to the question, "Says who?" Jesus in his suffering, shame, and dying became for us God's answer to the question, "Says who?" And then by resurrection God declared him right.

Can we seek God's redemptive will for us, challenging God for it if we must? Yes, truly, but let me add the second question which neither we nor Christ's churches can afford to ignore. Do we see God's redemptive will as being true for other people, including those not like us, not people we recognize as our kind, including people society and even (maybe especially) Christian society scorns? If we will not ask, will not pray, care, work and maybe suffer with them, how dare we ask for ourselves? If I will not seek God's love for the resentful, the embittered, the abrasive, the crushed and shamed, how will I dare ask God to test me and know my heart, to see if there is any hurtful way in me and lead me in the way everlasting? Jesus calls us to become vulnerable to people for him and with him. He does not call us to rule as Christians, to take over this nation or any nation, enforcing our will and elevating ourselves above others; rather, Jesus calls us to care and to serve God's love for this often bitter world. Amen.