

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU ASK FOR
Job 38: 1-7, 34-41; Mark 10: 35-45
Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time • October 17, 2021
by Pat Berger

Does it make you hold your breath just a bit when you hear James and John say to Jesus, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." Imagine being toe-to-toe with Jesus and making that request. (Oh: the word that they used that is translated "ask" has more the connotation of "demand.") And it doesn't say that Jesus rolled his eyes and shook his head and asked, "What now?" No. At least the way that it is recorded in Mark, Jesus asked them, "What is it that you want me to do for you?" What they wanted was to sit beside him in his glory, one of them at his right hand and one at his left.

Have you ever asked Jesus to do whatever you ask of him? Maybe you didn't have in mind sitting beside him in his glory (or maybe you did). Perhaps it had to do with your health or the health of someone close to you, or something at work, or a relationship or something: "Jesus, I want you to do whatever I ask." It sounds quite nervy, and yet, in a pinch . . . It doesn't seem as if the disciples were in such a pinch, or any pinch, at this point. They were doing what was very common in the culture in which they lived; they were jockeying for higher positions of honor within the group -- regardless of what other members of the group might want or deserve. James and John wanted the best seats in the heavenly house because that would give them more honor. We are not surprised to learn that the other disciples were not happy about their request.

Since Jesus was their leader, it was natural for them to make their request of him, and also natural for Jesus to ask some clarifying questions. As in, can you drink the cup that I drink? John Pilch tells in his book that this would have been a familiar question for James and John. He writes, "In Mediterranean culture, the head of the family fills the cups of all at table. Each one is expected to accept and drink what the head of the family has given." The cup here, then, would represent the life that God had chosen for each person. Jesus had

told the disciples twice by this time of his impending persecution, crucifixion and resurrection; could they drink that cup? Again, these followers show that they just don't get it: of course, we could drink that cup, they say. (One thing that we don't really see here, because of the way that the lectionary divides the readings, is that just before Jesus told the disciples the first time of his suffering, he healed a blind man, and right after our reading for today, Jesus heals another blind man. And maybe they weren't the only ones who weren't seeing??) Well, Jesus said, in fact you will drink that cup, but God is the one who determines honor. And then this servant leader taught them about who might earn honor: the one who wishes to be great must be a servant; the one who wants to be first must be a slave to all. Maybe not what James and John had in mind; maybe they would want to be more careful about what they asked for.

Job may have felt that he was in a similar position in our reading from that book today. We remember that God gave the Satan free rein with Job, only asking that Job's life be spared. Job remained faithful through the deaths of his family and of his animals and the loss of his land. By the time of our reading last week, though, he sounded quite a bit discouraged and asked for a meeting with God. In this week's verses, we heard the beginning of God's response -- and Job may indeed have wished he had been more cautious with his request. We don't often have the privilege of hearing God like this -- it sounds as if God has just about had it! Who do you think you are, he asks Job. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" What do you know? Can you do what I have done? Job doesn't get answers; Job gets questions. Big questions. Loud questions. Not the kind of questions that any mere mortal can answer -- the better part of valor here would be to keep one's mouth shut. And, to be careful what you ask for.

Jesus might have responded to James and John similarly to the way God is recorded as having responded to Job. This time, though, his inclination was to challenge them in a different way: here is what will be expected of the ones who will sit close to me in glory. (And here is why we will want to be careful with what we ask for.) They will act as

I have, Jesus said, as a servant. We have been created to be in relationship, first of all with our God, and then with all of those around us. We are whole people, and can only be whole people as we see ourselves in relationship with others. We want, of course, to be careful what we ask, but: how do we best ask, and live with what we have asked? We have been thinking for the past couple of weeks about how our gifts of time and talent and treasure impact who we are, as individuals and as a congregation, and as a result, what we can accomplish for the Kingdom. A budget has been prepared for the new year, committees are planning what they can do and who they can be within that budget, and each of us needs to prayerfully consider what our financial part will be and what our energy part will be for this church in the next year. How will we be servants for the Kingdom in the new year? We could think about all of this organizationally, too: how does the way we do things here reflect our faith, and reflect our call to be in relationship with God and with each other? We don't always get it right -- we are people, after all -- but, most often, from what I have experienced, as God watches the ones who are Plymouth Presbyterian Church in St. Helens, as God watches us acting in ways that show respect for each other's gifts and responsibilities, I imagine divine cheering. We know of whom we need to ask questions. We know who is in charge of what. It is extremely rare to hear harsh language about how something happens. It is much more common to hear, how can I be helpful? And if it is so here, I imagine it is the same in our homes and in places where we work and volunteer and play -- all the places and ways in which we serve. We have been freed from the domination culture in which Jesus' first disciples lived, in order that we might be disciples who serve. How can we be helpful?

Let us pray.