

Saturday, September 19

Acts 17:16-34 *From one man [God] made every nation of the human race to inhabit the entire earth....* (v.26)

In today's reading Paul speaks to a large Greek crowd in a city which happens to be *full of idols*. We know that Mohamed's approach to idol worshipers was quite violent. For that matter Peter himself (for different reasons) took up the sword in Gethsemane to defend his Lord. Here, Paul's approach is to reason. It is one of an invitation rather than a scolding. It reminds me of the late Billy Graham who would make the plea to unbelievers saying, "I'm not asking you to give up your religion or your idols. I'm just asking you to meet Christ."

Paul's invitation is also a notable departure from traditional rabbinical distinctions. Pagans! Unbelievers! Foreigners! Rather, he notes that God made *every* nation. And Paul invites all to the good news. It reminds me of another noble invitation of years ago: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these the homeless, tempest-tost to me."

Esther 2:5-8, 15-23; Psalms 75, 76; John 12:44-50

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Sunday, September 13

Job 38:1, 18-41 *"Have you considered the vast expanses of the earth? Tell me if you know it all."* (v.18 NET)

The story of Job always reminds me of the bigger picture. Like Job I often *give full vent to my complaint* of pains and sorrows. I do not believe honesty a sin. Besides, who is kidding who? As if God doesn't already know my inner angst, wounds, and frustrations! Just as God answered Job with a litany of impossible comprehensions, I too am reminded of the bigger picture.

I have often taken comfort in the lowly ant. I see them scurrying around and ask myself can I explain algebra to them? Never. Does that mean, therefore, that algebra doesn't exist? I am that ant. There must, likewise, be a much bigger picture.

Yesterday Warren Buffet downloaded tons of stock, unscathed by the recent market crash. I tried to understand the article on him. A neighbor later better explained Buffet's brilliant strategies, concluding, he is the GIOT—greatest investor of all time. Most investors live in frenzies. Buffet always seems unfettered. As though he understands a bigger picture, leaving him calm as a clam, rich as a king—and humble!

Psalms 24, 29; Revelation 18:1-8; Matthew 5:21-26

Monday, September 14

Psalms 57 *May your splendor cover the whole earth.* (v.5b)

Researchers have determined that one-fourth of the earth is made up of pastureland. In Ireland 67 percent of the country is considered *grassland* with 2 billion acres of it worldwide. Mosses alone cover 3.6 million square miles of the earth—an area the size of China. The Daisy and Orchid families (Asteraceae and Orchidaceae) are two of the largest flowering plant families on earth boasting a combined 62,000 species throughout the world.

Even the Sahara Desert hosts 2,800 plant species and, through satellite imagery, the University of Copenhagen recently registered 1.8 billion trees and shrubs located in that vast "barren" region of North Africa. In Scotland, of its 19 million acres, Heather alone carpets a stunning 5 million acres of it. There are 850 species of Sage in South America and the Mediterranean.

Of Canada's 2 billion acres, 900 million are forested Balsam Fir, White Spruce, Red Oak, Sugar Maple, and White Pine. And 140,000 acres of the tallest trees in the world are found soaring some nearly 400 feet high in the Redwood National Park of northern California.

Job 40:1-24; Psalms 56, 58; Acts 15:36—16:5; John 11:55—12:8

Tuesday, September 15

Psalm 62 *Do not trust what you can gain by oppression.* (v.10)

The Hebrew word for “oppression” in today’s reading is *oseq*. Synonyms include injustice, distress, and wrongful gain. Whether being hunted by Saul, warding off military threats from neighbors, or even enduring his own son’s coup, David came to know a thing or two about injury, injustice, and fraudulent gain. For that matter, even by his own indiscretions.

What is it that entices us to cheat others? To fraud and injury? Especially when destiny leads us to power. Revenge? Greed? Insecurity? Self-promotion?

When I recall a bloody Christ being led to his crucifixion I am reminded that, by all historical accounts of what he was capable, he could have wiped out the entire Roman army and, one could argue, justifiably so. How he must have loved to have fed those five thousand, to have healed the sick, to have raised so many poor in spirit—and to be able to continue doing so. And yet at his trial he chose to deny gain and, by doing so, won it back in ways no one imagined.

Job 40:1, 41:1-11; Psalm 61; Acts 16:6-15; John 12:9-19

Wednesday, September 16

Job 42:1-17 *So the Lord restored what Job had lost...and doubled all that belonged to Job.* (v.10)

The story of Job reminds me of what scholars refer to as the “criterion of embarrassment.” To paraphrase apologist Wesley Huff, it is a criterion by which historical accounts are considered to more likely be accurate when a highly regarded figure is revealed to be shamed or dishonored. Examples being the scandal of David and Bathsheba, Moses’ homicide, and of course, the trial of Christ.

With Job what is unusual is that two highly regarded figures face this. Both Job and God. Job who was not only a wealthy man, a pillar of his society but also described as a genuinely contrite and spiritual man. Then, utterly brought to his knees in shame and ruin. And, of course, there is God Himself railed at length with bruising honesty of Job’s complaints.

I hardly qualify as Job but there is something very appealing to me that when I feel broken, battered, and confused that I can take my open wounds and complaints to a listening God.

Psalm 72; Acts 16:16-24; John 12:20-26

Thursday, September 17

Psalm 71 *...you have taught me since I was young and I am still declaring your amazing deeds.* (v.17)

I have learned that conversions come in many shapes and sizes. For some it is a quiet, slow process. For others, since they can remember as a child. Some, through literature and study or from the inspiration of a friend. And others, like me, get a lightning bolt.

In a newly released documentary of the 2011 Joplin tornado a young man who loved Jesus recalled, in tears, how frightened he was. “I thought it was the Rapture and that I might be left behind because I was gay.”

I too sometimes feel my epiphany was like a prized tour in which I was granted by clerical error. I later thought that not only does God not succumb to clerical errors, but any such notion is an insult to the crucifixion of Christ. Whenever I recall that prized tour I still fall apart. Any imperfections I may have just don’t hold a candle to the might, and grace, and power, and wonder, and love that God alone chose to tear that 60-foot temple curtain in half forever—for *all* of us.

Job 28:1-28; Psalm 70; Acts 16:25-40; John 12:27-36a

Friday, September 18

John 12:36b-43 *...they loved praise from men more than praise from God.* (v.43)

When I was in the fifth grade, I recall making fun of a girl in class that made everyone laugh. The kind of things kids do. Get others to laugh at your joke. Old yearbooks capture her gorgeous. So, not only was I mean, but I was also stupid.

I found peer pressure a mighty force all my life. A small dose can be a good thing. Helps socialize and circulate. Heavier doses got me foolishly making fun of others, or engaging a recreational substance that left me paranoid, or wielding a smoking habit into my 50s.

In today’s reading, peer pressure among elite Jews who were persuaded by Christ’s words, nevertheless, followed the herd of skeptics rather than lose their place in the synagogue. Perhaps a clue to Jesus’ observation that “narrow is the gate that leads to life and few there be that find it.”

I left my pack one summer night in 1968. For some reason, peer pressure had lost its lure that night and I stumbled upon such a gate that changed everything.

Esther 1:1-4, 10-19; Psalm 69; Acts 17:1-15