

“THE THREE BEARS AND GOD”
Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Psalm 22:1-15; Hebrews 4:12-16
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The Rev. Ryan Lambert

Our lectionary texts for this week include messages that seem to stand in deep contrast from one another. First we heard two of the strongest statements of lament found in the bible—in Job and from the Psalmist the writers express their feelings of divine abandonment as they wonder where God is in the midst of their trials. Job’s deeply personal lament draws us in and evokes our own doubts about God’s presence. The words of the Psalmist are deeply conflicted—alternating between expressions of doubt and belief—words that remind us of our of our own wrestling with God and the strength of our belief. Finally, in our lesson from Hebrews we hear words that invoke a reminder of God’s claim upon us and our claim on God that comes through the saving work of Christ. Separately these texts offer complicated and sometimes challenging reminders of our expectations of God and our expectations of ourselves. When read together these texts allow us to pour out our doubts and frustrations upon God with the hope that God’s grace really will come through for us—and as I weighed the words of doubt and assurance that I heard in these passages I found myself thinking, of course, of fairy tales.

One of the fairy tales that I best remember from my childhood is the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears. As you know in the story Goldilocks enters the home of the three bears while the bears are out. Upon entering the home Goldilocks finds three bowls sitting upon the dining room table and upon sampling from each of the three bowls, she declares one too hot, one too cold, and one just right. This pattern repeats itself when she tests the three chairs in the living room and finds two of them too big and one just the right size. Finally the saga of Goldilocks’ breaking and entering culminates as she decides that she needs to grab a bit of a nap and she looks for a bed where she can lie down. Again...three beds...a predictable result...one too hard, one too soft, and one that was just right.

When the bears come home they discover “that someone has been eating their porridge, someone has been sitting in their chairs, and someone has been sleeping in their beds”...and in fact, they found Goldilocks fast asleep in that “just right” bed and as I child I was sure she would be wonderful meal for those three bears, but in classic fairy tale form, Goldilocks makes her escape when she is startled awake...and she disappears into the forest leaving the stunned bears to return to normal life in their house. If only our lives were a fairy tale...

But if our lives were just a fairy tale we wouldn’t find the story of Job quite so compelling, would we? In this week’s text from Job we hear the third in a series of Job’s discussions with some friends who are arguing with him about the nature of his suffering. His friends would have him believe that all that ails him is directly related to the sins and transgressions that he has committed. Job valiantly tries to rebuke his friends, but in his rebuke you can hear him searching for the moment when he can plead his case before God. How many of us when confronted by bad news, difficult times, or evidence of our own failings don’t immediately slide into a defensive posture...hoping that we can avoid blame and divert the attention away from ourselves. It doesn’t matter that Job’s so-called friends are heaping a distorted notion of God’s retribution upon their already hurting friend—their less than friendly support goes virtually unnoticed amid his pain. Job’s response is to be defensive—he wants to prove to his friends that his struggles aren’t of his making and he wants a chance to plead his case before God—“I would lay my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments.” Job is a mass of contradiction in this passage—he wants desperately for his friends to understand that his God would not heap bad thing upon bad thing upon his shoulders, but even as he attempts to defend himself **and** God, the isolation he feels will not let him defend God with the entirety of his being because he “cannot perceive him; ⁹on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.” And so in Job we see our faith articulated in a form that is all-too-common—even for those of us who claim this faith as ours. We often join Job in

damning God with faint praise and that outwardly or half-heartedly thanking God, while all the while we are consumed with our wondering—wondering if there will ever be that moment when we can be sure. And so we search—day after day, year after year and find that our faith story has become a story of a faith where we cannot find a place where we can sit comfortably with God. And we remain separated from God as assume that his faith thing is too hard...

The words from Psalm 22 are likewise filled with stinging words of lament. This passage starts with the words that will be echoed in the Christian tradition when Jesus utters them upon the cross—“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and it ends with a picture of death found amid despair. In between these words of isolation the Psalmist speaks words of praise for a God who has rescued his ancestors and has known, loved, and protected him since his birth. The psalmist is speaking in both personal and corporate language—acknowledging both his own history and his deep faith **and** the history and abiding faith of the nation of Israel. But even as his words of faith break through in the midst of his despair, it is that despair that cannot be ignored in this passage. The psalmist is giving voice to the despair that the nation of Israel has felt all too often—and rather than ascribing that despair to his or their own ambivalence, to his or their own failures, to his or their own doubts—the psalmist instead ascribes that despair to God. In doing so the psalmist sets before us a litany of lament that I believe sometimes stands in the way of our faith. Make no mistake, it is wholly acceptable, it is HOLY and acceptable, I believe, to utter words of lament to God—to give voice to our questions and our fears, to speak of our doubts about the presence of God—all of these words are allowed—because God can handle them and likewise our relationship with God can handle the fullness of our faith. Our laments and our doubts have a place in our relationship with God. But, too often I think, we who claim this faith as our own, are all too willing to join the psalmist in announcing our laments but we fail to announce the fullness of our experience of God. We fail to announce the moments when God’s presence has been un-mistakable, we fail to announce the ways that God’s love and presence has been evidenced through relationships, through undeserved forgiveness, through laughter and in simple words of compassion that arrive in the nick of time. And when we cannot recognize God’s love in the midst of our pain we remain separated from God and end up without a place to sit—because we believe we are not strong enough, God is too far away, or faith is too hard...and we can’t sit here with God either!

And that is where I think we too often get stuck...with the faith tale only partly told. Too often I think we wrestle with God, we entrust God with our laments and our doubts and then we call our relationship with God complete...you have me—all of me—we might say. And it is alright to be there for a while—but it imagine if Goldilocks had stopped searching after two bowls of porridge—she never would have quenched her hunger, imagine if she had ignored that third chair and never been able to sit down comfortably—imagine if the story ended with her trying two beds and leaving the house—the story would have seemed unresolved.

It seems absurd, but that is where most of us too often get stuck—with a faith story that is unresolved. Because even as God accepts our laments and our wrestling God also calls us to something more. God desperately wants us to get to a place where we can find a just right place on our faith journey. We might not stay there for long...but the fullness of our faith story cannot be known if we don’t know that grace-filled love-inspired deeply-connected just-right experience of God at least once in a while. AND if we are going to find and experience that place we have to be willing to search for it beyond our laments and our doubts. And that is where we as Christians encounter the love of God as experienced through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Our passage in Hebrews tells of the word of God that will cut through and penetrate everything—there is no longer room for sham, pretense, shame, or guilt—we are all naked and laid bare before God—and through it all the love of God reigns. It is a strange and beautiful reality that is proclaimed here—that God is able to truly know us and that even with the knowledge of who and what we truly are—God’s love is fully available to us as evidenced in the life of Jesus who sits enthroned not in a place of power and might, but in a place where we can know unending mercy and grace. It is that

simple...and it is that complicated—and so I wonder what happens when we get rid of this chair—the one that is uncomfortable because it tempts us to believe faith is too hard. I wonder too what happens when we get rid of this chair—the one that is uncomfortable because we aren't sure we are worthy to sit in such a glorious place. And what if we are left simply with a place to sit...where we can lift up whatever is upon our hearts and know that God will accept it. Perhaps we just need to be willing keep testing the chairs, perhaps we just need to be willing to accept that we are worthy...perhaps we simply need to share the whole of our faith story so that we can find a place where we can sit comfortably with God. I'm not sure what that chair looks like...but perhaps the throne of isn't so big after all...but I bet it is comfortable and Holy—and I know God welcomes us all here when we are ready!

Thanks be to God, Amen.

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