

Sunday, October 18, 2009

[Job 38:1-7, \(34-41\)](#)

[Psalm 104:1-9, 25, 37b](#)

[Hebrews 5:1-10](#)

[Mark 10:35-45](#)

We count on routines. They structure each interval of time that comprises our lives. There are daily, weekly, monthly and yearly routines; routines for the week and for the weekend, for the day and for the evening. We get out of sorts when something disrupts them. We cling to the predictability and stability they provide.

Routines are also liturgies. In the original Greek, "liturgy" means "the work of the people", and often referred to public works projects like bridges and aqueducts. These days, we use it to refer to the Eucharist and other rituals of the church. But don't our ordinary, pedestrian routines also have the character of liturgy? The liturgy of the Eucharist is an offering, a raising up of self to God for our own well-being, the welfare of our community and the glory of God. Daily routines are self-offerings too. Through them, we offer up our time, and our talent, and our treasure to God for the benefit of ourselves and of the world we inhabit. These routines share the ritual nature of the church's liturgies. They are regular and predictable. And through them, as through the church's worship, we offer ourselves to God.

This idea comports with the Reformation tenet, "the priesthood of all believers". Pursuing our own routines, we function as celebrants, priests, of our own liturgies.

Today's passage from the letter to the Hebrews, speaking of the qualifications of the high priests of ancient Israel, teaches us about the way in which all of us are to exercise our priestly role.

First, we are to celebrate our liturgies with discipline, i.e., at the proper time and in the proper way. If our routine includes cooking dinner for a family, we should prepare the meal with care and serve it at the expected time. If our liturgy calls us to attend meetings, we should arrive on time and prepared. Do we always meet these and other standards? Of course not. Should we aspire to do so? Absolutely. It's part of our priesthood.

Second, we should celebrate our liturgies with charity. Routines assume a life of their own sometimes, and we follow them for their own sake, or only for the sake of the stability they afford us. But God has woven them into the fabric of the world, and calls us to offer these liturgies for the common good, with a flexibility and attentiveness animated by love for the members of the community in whose midst and for whose sake we perform them.

Third, we are to celebrate our liturgies with humility. Every human routine forms a very small part of a very large picture. Sometimes our liturgy doesn't get much recognition.

The humility with which we are enjoined to offer it requires us not to get too exercised about this. Here are two examples, from church life:

- 1) The Taste of Georgetown. It used to be solely a Grace Church event. Now it's bigger, and Grace's efforts are part of a much larger enterprise. Grace doesn't always get the recognition it deserves. We should seek to remedy this situation, but not let this concern distract us from the larger purpose of the event.
- 2) The Diocese of Washington and the Episcopal Church. These are large entities of which parishes like ours form only a small part. Sometimes they do or say things we don't agree with. We should make our own views known, without expecting to have the last word.

So we're all priests, each celebrating his or her own liturgies, seeking through the routines that structure our lives to offer ourselves to God and God's world. We ask God to help us do this with all the discipline, charity and humility we can muster.

But let's be honest. We expect something in return. In this, we resemble both Job and the two apostles, James and John, who approach Jesus in this morning's gospel.

Job was his family's "priest". Early in the "mighty book" that bears his name, we learn that Job offered daily sacrifices for himself and his loved ones, to atone for any sins they might have committed and to keep disaster at bay. Job's liturgy, his daily sacrifice, was a kind of payment on a cosmic insurance policy. He knew that his offering wouldn't make life easy. But he expected something in return for it: that any problems or crises would be predictable and manageable. What he got, though, were afflictions far beyond human capacity to manage or comprehend, and his frustration exacerbated by the empty counsel of friends who tried to convince him otherwise.

James and John, fishermen, probably had daily liturgies too, having to do with preparing their boats and equipment, where and how they cast their nets, etc. They might also have hoped that these routines would stave off disasters and keep whatever difficulties they encountered predictable and manageable. But they lived in an unpredictable, sometimes unmanageable world. Whims of sea, and fish, and small-town markets undoubtedly vexed and perplexed them.

James and John probably wanted places at the right hand and left of Jesus, the High Priest, because they thought this would increase the power of their liturgies – enable them to compel God to give them what they expected.

"You don't know what you're asking for", Jesus tells them, and warns them of a baptism of suffering that he and they must undergo. Job's afflictions, Jesus' crucifixion, the persecution of his apostles, our own crises and disasters: these unwanted baptisms destroy the idea that our liturgies, however faithfully performed, secure something in return. They don't. No cosmic Guarantor insures predictability and manageability.

But we've always known this, haven't we? First of all, we know that the expectation of something in return robs our liturgies of charity and humility, and that disappointed

expectations enervate the discipline they require. Further, we wonder to whom we're making our offerings. Sensing profound threats, experiencing difficulties that vex and even overwhelm us, we come to feel pretty sure any applicable insurance policies have long since been canceled, and the Guarantor has absconded.

Into this empty place, abandoned by the absconding Guarantor and his canceled policy, steps the God of Job's 38th chapter and of Psalm 104, from both of which we heard passages this morning. God tells Job that he, Job, has asked a lot of questions, but now it's God's turn to interrogate: "Who prescribed bounds for the sea, and set bars and doors, and said 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed'?" This God covers himself with light as with a garment, and rides on the wings of the wind, says Psalm 104. Surely our liturgies, our offerings, and our expectations of the returns they will yield, do not bind such a reality as this One.

We need a God we cannot bind. We know that unpredictable and unmanageable things will befall us in life. Some will be afflictions, some will turn out to be unexpected and unbidden blessings whose meaning, even whose character as blessing, we can't grasp. We hope there aren't too many such eventualities in our lives, but we know there will be some. And we want to give them to someone who knows what to do with them even, maybe especially, when we don't. This is the boundless God of Job 38 and Psalm 104, sovereign over wind and sea, good and evil, affliction and blessing.

It's stewardship season – time for an irritating, but also reassuring, church routine. It's the liturgy of filling out, signing, and returning pledge cards, of deciding where to commit our time and talent. It's also the liturgy of endeavoring to fulfill these commitments with discipline, charity and humility. For all of this, we certainly, and rightfully, expect something in return: a church that uses our resources prudently, that offers its members spiritual care and guidance, along with opportunities to contribute to and enrich its ministries.

At the same time, though, we know that we're offering time, talent and treasure to a mysterious God who is not bound by what we expect. In fact, by our offerings – church pledges, and all the other routines that comprise our liturgies – we invoke the presence of this God. We know that discipline, charity and humility are fragile qualities when reposed in the vessels of clay that we are. Our expectations, and their disappointment, destroy them and turn our liturgies into empty repetitions. Only a God unbound by human expectation can make them into holy offerings. To the glory of this God, we pay our pledges, offer our time and talent, carry out our routines, celebrate our liturgies.