

What a beautiful day in Maine! And so was yesterday as we gathered together. We were treated to beautiful music for the Prelude and Postlude by Judy Falconer, Linda Brunner and Marianne Louderback.

We lit the memorial candle in honor of the crew of the El Faro and 20 month old Colton who died in Lewiston last week. My dear friend's grandson, Myles, is battling the same disease that claimed Colton. Please continue to hold Myles and his family in your prayers.

Sally Gundersen and I will attend the UCC Maine Conference Annual Meeting in Augusta Friday and Saturday. Sara Mitchell will be snackpacking as she did last week. If we can get enough volunteers, each person would only have to give an hour a month or so to this worthwhile project! Thank you Sara and Cynthia for the first four weeks!

Please remember that the Sunday School is collecting nonperishable foods and pennies through the month of October!

The Deacons met yesterday and the Board will meet next Monday.

GOSPEL READING Mark 10:17-31

EPISTLE READING

Hebrews 4:12-

16

Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12 –Most of us

have never had the need or opportunity to seek an audience with a king. Nigeria is a country, however, in which kings are still very real social powers. Although the country holds elections, traditional kings are still acknowledged. Every village, town, and city has a king. Anyone who wants to promote an event has to visit the king to get permission to do so. A king may be very rich or very poor, but he is still king and must be consulted about events in his domain. In the Old and New Testaments, God is described as Israel's king despite the presence of earthly rulers. The priest was the intermediary or advocate between the people and God. In Hebrews, God's own son is the high priest who intercedes for us and answers us.

HEBREW SCRIPTURE READING Job23:1-9, 16-17- In the passage preceding this one, Job's friend has admonished Job to turn to God in repentance so that he may be restored- he assumes Job's calamity is based on sin in his life. It is easier for us to reflect on the story line of Job without entering into the pain of his conversations with his friends. In these conversations we see a Job who is human. He is a man of integrity, yet he is also a man of questions and a man who struggles with his agony. We are not only told of Job's incredible faith and great feats; we are also told of his weaknesses and shortcomings.

Mighty Lord, help us look for You in the north and in the south, in our homes and in our workplaces, in our families and in our relationships. May we never stop pursuing Your

truth. Assure us with Your word that You are with us wherever we go, in Jesus' name.
Amen

MESSAGE

Why?

Beth Hood

Earlier this week I asked for your prayers for the crew of the El Faro. You may have read of the two little boys in Lewiston who became very ill after visiting a petting zoo. The little boy, Myles, who is still fighting for his life is the grandson of a dear friend of mine. I am and I ask you all to hold Myles and his family in your prayers. As I pray for Myles, I am mindful that we received a devastating answer to our prayers for the El Faro.

Most of us have some familiarity with Job and his story, The Bible's poetic reflection on the question of suffering, especially undeserved suffering. In his day and sometimes in ours, there were those who said that obedience and faithfulness to God's precepts, keeping the covenant, would bring prosperity, health, and safety. Conversely, disobedience would bring disaster. It's a nice system, very neat and logical: there is payback for sin, and reward for virtue. In Job's case, the punishment is so great, losing everything and all his children and then his health, that his companions assume that his offense must have been unusually heinous.

When disaster strikes, there must be a good reason, specifically someone's guilt. You've heard TV evangelists blame tsunamis and hurricanes on various sins and sinners; their attempts to explain such massive suffering is like the words of Job's friends who are interpreting the religious tradition in order to make some sense of Job's sudden calamity.

Job begins his response to Eliphaz by describing his emotional and attitudinal condition. He has a 'complaint' against God. As he perceives God putting him through his ordeal, Job is asking the wrenching question, "Why?" God's hand remained heavy despite his pleas. Within the cycle of grieving all of us enter into a time of asking why. We cannot forbid this questioning nor can we give answer for God. This is a stage in which the human heart simply cries out, "Why?"

Job is not alone in disagreeing with his friends. In fact, if they had indeed been friends, perhaps they would have done better at active listening or at being a compassionate presence, just sitting with him in his pain and suffering. Still, Job is not alone, because we are with Job, aren't we? Don't we watch the innocent suffer and wonder at how just, how fair the universe is? When we see our children and grandchildren-or someone else's

children or grandchildren-suffer from illness or hunger or war, don't we ask where God is in all of that? How much more innocent could one get than being a child? Myles, like Mara, like Sabrina, like Sage and Rex, like Hadley, like Abigail, has brought only love and joy into the lives around him. No, Job isn't alone in this story. We sit with him sometimes, too, and ask where we can find God in it all.

You can hardly read today's text, "If I go forward, God is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive God", without hearing the echo of Psalm 139: "Where can I go from Your spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?..If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me fast." Two ancient voices express different moments in the human condition, times of loss and questioning, times of utter assurance of God's presence and love. We go through both in our lifetimes, and 'faith' becomes at such moments a very different kind of word than just right belief in the correct doctrines. Faith becomes trust that centers us in the mysterious One whose power and wisdom are so far beyond our own feeble but often noble attempts to make sense of the universe.

Job's friends are like preachers who have no good news and no comforting presence to share, only harsh judgment and a kind of logic that violates Job's integrity. Even though Job says that he can't feel God's presence, that he can't find God so he can ask why these disasters have befallen him, he still holds to a stubborn kind of faith, a trust that God is just even if life is not. And so he longs to find God, to stand before God and make his case, like an attorney in a court before a judge. Scraping his sores, and surrounded by well-intentioned but misguided friends, Job feels that God is far, far away. When things are really bad, it may not be that God has left us but that we are blocked by pain from perceiving the God from whom we cannot flee.

In India, there is an ancient tribal proverb. It says that before we can see properly we must first shed our tears to clear the way. And the Muslim poet, Rumi, has said "the wound is the place where the Light enters you." The name of the ship El Faro means 'the lighthouse.' In our moments of deepest despair, can we clear our vision and see the light? Only if, like Job, we can maintain our faith.

The reading from Job this morning says that there is a way to question and yet fear God. Perhaps that is what faith is. Maybe we must believe and reverence God without all of our questions answered. Life is messy, but faith is holding onto God, even when it doesn't feel like God is there. Because the promise of Scripture is that God is always with his children, even when they are struggling. Trust Him-He is there.

There are no pat answers to the parents and grandparents of little Myles or to the families of the El Faro crew or the students in Oregon or to any of us devastated by loss. The Book of Job bears witness to the fact that that the only thing that can make divine absence and silence worse are attempts to make quick sense of it or to proffer a simple solution to it. Instead, when you are faced with a suffering sister or brother, the best thing you may be able to do is acknowledge the pain, admit that you don't have an answer either, and then sit quietly on the ash heap to wait with your suffering friend for God to put in an appearance. That is sometimes the kindest and most compassionate thing anyone can offer.