Sermon on Proper 27
(Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16)

I’m thankful this weekend for an existence that allows us to continually explore God’s beauty, truth and goodness; to do so with all the puzzlement, effort and humility we have and to know that at the end of the day it is grace that defines us; God’s acceptance of us as we are that gives us courage to do this exploring.

There’s a lot to be discouraged about in our world, a lot for which we feel like “clamming up,” “cocooning in our caves” is more appropo than exploring, a lot for which we are tempted to be unthankful whether it’s the latest news, the pressures we feel to succeed, troubles our children are facing or simply the brute fact of growing older.

Lately someone said to me, “growing old is just losing one damn thing after another.” And I thought, yes, but, what if that’s the very landscape upon which God calls us to explore in greater depth what life really is all about? Will we accept our society’s definition, or the challenge of God’s Spirit?

With God’s help, the latter, and because of God’s grace, decisively and with Thanks!

The texts offered to us this week seem the most unlikely dance partner for the secular feast of Thanksgiving being played out in family living rooms today and tomorrow but I would suggest that they are the very landscape we must traverse, we must explore if the word we structure our worship around, Eucharist, Greek for Thanksgiving, is not to become title.

I remember the first time I really encountered the book of Job; it was an advanced seminar in Hebrew language studies; three times a week we students would catch a city bus to the downtown Eastside;

We were doing work at the United Church on Hastings and Main; after serving in the community we would tip-toe past sleeping drunks and strung-out drug-users in the pews to an empty classroom in which we would seek to decipher the difficult poetry of Job.

It was a apt combination; the visceral suffering of the streets juxtaposed with the searing questions and suffering of Job.

I signed up for the course thinking I’d be wrestling with a solution to the problem of evil but came to understand that Job does not provide a solution but is a lengthy and fuller stating of the problem!

Job opens with this outrageous scene: Angels and God discussing policy, one Angel, called in Hebrew, *ha-Satan,* which mean the Accuser, and from which we get the proper name, Satan, brings a charge against an unsuspecting human being and God caves

As a result, the most righteous man suffers excruciatingly, on a dare; as the result of a celestial game of chicken.

No one reading the book would have imaged that this is how things actually happen; it’s an opening conceit, used to set up the story, used as a kind of tongue-in-cheek answer to the question, “where does evil, where does suffering come from?”

“Well let me tell you about a time when God and the devil played truth or dare!” No, it doesn’t!

The book of Job is so shattering, so sobering because we quickly realize that there are no easy answers; there is no easy cause and explanation to why things happen the way they do.

In a backhanded kind of way it calls us to a new kind of community; it does so by throughout the book showing what *doesn’t* work! When things go badly don’t first of all look for someone or something to blame, that’s a dead end, look to live well in the moment with those you are with, in the community where you are. Seek to alleviate suffering together; seek a way forward together because there is no easy, technological answer that will “fix things.”

In our second reading from Hebrews we get a sense how early Christians took up the implicit challenge of a book like Job.

We are told, first off, that God *has not* subjected the world to come, that is, the new thing God is doing in and through Jesus and the Church, to the whims or accusations of angels.

We are not to imagine that the future of the world, or, to get more practical, our *lives*, this community, is being planned or manipulated in some secret place.

Rather we are encouraged to understand that God’s plans are very much made in concert *with* human beings, with us!

The Son of God has come among us, not as an angel, but “as the exact imprint of God’s very being” and as “lower than the angels,” that is as a truly human being.

Job provides a backdrop, a landscape which makes clear that the even the most righteous man on earth can’t control the most important things in his life

This is not contested by the message of the New Testament: bad things will happen to good people.

But in Hebrews we discover extraordinary good news, the inverse of Job if you will: even the most sinful of us is crowned with glory and honor; called by God to step boldly into this fraught world; to enter a community and live for it’s betterment

Far from staying in heaven and playing celestial truth or dare games, God becomes Job in Jesus Christ, suffering unjustly as the most righteous individual in the face of the powers.

So that those of us who are not nearly as righteous as Job can be a part of what this new community!

God loves us so much that God is not satisfied with words, even the important words of a book like Job, but becomes the Word made flesh.

Which brings us to our gospel text of the day; at first an unpromising place for us to end after the high drama of Job and Hebrews.

Here, we’re dropped back into the existential pain of Job for I think it’s true to say that though we might not be able to relate to the open sores on Job’s body, almost all of us have open sores on our hearts, our emotional lives have been, at one time or another, gashed or torn.

Most of us read the sayings of divorce in the New Testament with trepidation and guilt. I’ve just been working through the grief of a my middle son’s divorce; over and over my dear one and I think, “is there something else we could have said, something else we could have done?”

Reading a passage like this one probes old wounds; it may leave us feeling like a failure; how can we say we’re crowned with glory and honour when we’ve not been successful in our closest relationships?

So here’s the thing, just like the message of Job is not meant to mock our efforts at understanding, so the message of any biblical text, even difficult texts that pierce our hearts, are never meant to leave us mired in guilt.

Rather, they are instruments that the Holy Spirit can use to help us face ourselves so that we can, with God’s help, become, wiser, more realistic and more hopeful at the same time, if that’s not too much of a contradiction, but also, more grateful, more grateful that even in the midst of whatever Job-like horror we’ve endured or we’re presently enduring, we are addressed, we are not on our own, Christ is right beside us! The Word made flesh

From a positive perspective, the “strictness” of Jesus here is meant to affirm a radical equality of women in a culture that routinely gave men the power to decide the fate of relationships on a whim.

Even Holy Scripture, Jesus says, can’t be used to diss this equality! The original vision of egalitarian society rooted in lifelong commitment is not eclipsed by necessary compromises whether by Moses or by us!

Again, from the positive perspective, marriage, and by extension all committed relationships can reflect our partnership with God.

But what if it doesn’t work? What of our open sores on our heart that mocks our idealism?

Listen sisters and brothers, it is this same Jesus who now holds our hands and leads us towards glory by the path of forgiveness and healing; if he became Job’s wounds will he not know how to assuage our own?

If he experienced death in every person’s place will he not help us put to death the blame game in our own hearts; will he not help still the voices that constantly accuse us; will he not show us that our glory and honour is to live! To live with our challenges and pain, to keep exploring the new life he gives us in this community as his sisters and brothers!

Come to this table with that confidence; the Word made flesh in bread and wine, the Word made flesh *is* our radical equality at this table! Eucharist, this table of Thanksgiving is, not about losing one thing after another, but all about us gaining one amazing person, one amazing grace after another! Amen and Alleluia!