

Sermon, 10.17.2021

In the name of God, Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit

About a dozen years ago, I was at a conference in Washington, D.C., and I had a free afternoon. I stepped out of my hotel with my destination in sight -- the National Cathedral.

Now, since this was in the days before smartphones lived in everyone's back pocket, I didn't have a map, but as I left my hotel, I could see the very top of the cathedral's tallest tower, the highest point in the city, and I figured I would just walk towards it.

Little did I know that Washington, D.C., unlike my little neighborhood in St. Paul, is not built on a grid. In fact, I found out later, D.C. is notorious for being hard to navigate because of the number of diagonal streets, some dating back to the city's original 1790 plan – streets that feel perfectly straight when you're walking them, but that actually take you veering off at a significant angle.

So, as I set out for my destination, I would walk a few blocks, and then find myself having to cut back over in the opposite direction. I'd walk a few more, finally feeling confident I was headed to the right place, and then I'd realize I had chosen the exact wrong direction.

As I walked, I kept my eye out on the very tip top of the tower. At certain points, I would lose it in the trees, only to discover it was not where I expected it to be when it reappeared a few blocks later. Long story short, I made it. But this walk turned out to be a heck of a lot longer than I had planned. It required, it turned out, a constant process of *reorientation*.

I'd walk a little, then look up and try to figure out where I was headed. I'd point myself in the right direction and walk some more, only to look up again and have to once again reorient myself in the right direction. Walk, reorient. Walk, reorient. Walk, reorient.

I was reminded of this long and winding walk because of today's readings from the Book of Job and the Book of Mark. They are, I think, both stories of *divine reorientation*.

Let's look at Job. Job has lived a righteous life. He is a good friend, a good husband, a good father to his ten children. He is deeply faithful to God. And so, when utterly terrible things begin to happen to him, he is completely disoriented. Totally confused. He turns to his friends, to his wife, and finally to God, trying desperately, in various states of anger, grief, and confusion to try to figure out just what is going on.

Then there are James and John. These two disciples have left their livelihoods and homes to follow Jesus. They have tried to follow his teachings, to show their faithfulness to him. It hasn't been easy, but they have worked hard to figure out the right path. And they think they have done it right.

So when James and John hear Jesus forecast his own crucifixion and resurrection, they immediately begin to think about what comes next, trying to position themselves high-up in the new post-resurrection world. "Grant us to sit," they say, "one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." They seem a little like politicians jockeying for power in the new "Jesus administration," certain that they deserve the best seats in the house when Jesus takes the throne.

All three of these men are trying to get oriented. To figure out where they stand. To get themselves to their desired destination of stable -- perhaps even comfortable -- ground.

And in their search for this stable ground, in this attempt to get oriented, the divine answer they get is definitely NOT the one they wanted to hear.

God responds from a massive whirlwind to Job, saying: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?"

Similarly, Jesus tells his disciples: "You do not know what you are asking."

Whoof. These are not the responses they wanted to hear. Instead of getting clear on what exactly is happening to them, they remain disoriented, off-track, lost.

They are lost because they have made the situation about themselves. about them. They are trying to figure out where THEY stand. What's going on in THEIR lives. What THEIR future holds. And in response, the divine reorientation is actually a simple one: "it's not all about you."

God asks Job if he was there when the earth was formed. How, God asks, could you presume to understand something as great, complex, wild, and dangerous as creation? Nope, God tells Job, you are not the center of the universe.

Jesus says to his disciples: whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. Nope, Jesus tells his disciples, you don't get to be Chief of Staff when I am Emperor.

Instead, each of these stories is a call to think – and act -- in a different and radical way. A push from God to complete reorientation. To a total change in direction.

Job is asked to see and understand his place in totally different and much broader ecosystem. To see the larger, breathtaking connectedness of all things and his small part in it.

The disciples are asked to be part a different kind of politics, economy, and culture from the world in which they live, one that prioritizes serving others, one that would seem utterly foreign in a Roman power structure based on domination.

What, then -- today's readings ask of us -- is the reorientation that you – and we – are being invited into right now?

For all of us, constantly reminded of the catastrophes caused by climate change, we are being asked to reorient away from a stance of consumption and towards an ethic of stewardship of all creation.

For most of us, living lives of power and privilege in a world where too many are powerless and oppressed, we are being asked to reorient from a stance of “fixing” and “knowing” and towards an attitude of authentic listening and following.

For those of us in the church, we are being asked reorient away from a mindset of “you come to me” and towards a mindset of “we will come to you.”

Perhaps in your own life there are reorientations you want to make: from a frantic pace of life towards more room for sabbath. From relationships that feel shallow and transactional to ones that feel deeper and more transformational. From a mindset of scarcity to a sense of gratitude.

Whatever the reorientations are, we know that they will require hard work. Like the walk the hill up to the Cathedral, making these changes may take more time than we might like. They will require us to relinquish goals, acknowledge mistakes, and see ourselves as imperfect. We may be sore at the end of some of them.

My hope is that as we learn to live in a state of constant reorientation, we can make these corrections with compassion for ourselves and for each other.

That we accept that it is okay to be flawed and in need of redirection.

That we look to other people who can support us even as they are pushing us to change.

And that we hold onto the faith that somewhere there will be always be another glimpse of that cathedral on the hill, that more authentic relationship, that healthier planet, and that more just world that will guide us as we move along the Way of Love.

Amen.