

October 20, 2024 Message

Catherine Brewer

Sermon “Power and Grace Beyond Our Understanding”

Once again, good morning and welcome! For those of you who may not know me yet, my name is Catherine Brewer; I usually go by “Catie” for short. I accompany Brent Brewer, who is one of the elders here at FPC and frequently found near the sound board. I am also mom to 7th grader, Alonzo and 5th grader, Lillian. On many Sundays, I lead a video discussion Sunday School class. During the week, I am a faculty member in the Department of Chemical & Materials Engineering at NMSU.

About half of my job is teaching adults, from introducing 18- and 19-year-olds to their first engineering calculations, to seniors in their capstone design course and graduate students preparing for their thesis defenses. Listening to our Gospel lesson, I could not help but feel empathy for Jesus. This passage occurs as Jesus is journeying to Jerusalem for the last time. Jesus is trying to prepare his disciples for his death and resurrection. When he tells them what will happen, they do not understand and do not want to hear such unhappy predictions. Then follows more walking, more teachings, and more miracles. Right before the today’s reading, Jesus describes his upcoming suffering and death to his disciples for the second time. He is straightforward and clear: “We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.”

As a teacher, I would have expected a lot of questions at this point. “How do you know this is what will happen?” “Why are you telling us this?” “What should we do?” “Why are we not avoiding Jerusalem?” These would have been welcome questions, a chance to explain the prophecies and reassure that this was the plan. Instead of such questions, James and John, who have been with Jesus during the whole of his ministry, ask Jesus for a favor. “Teacher”, they said, “we want you to do for us whatever we ask.” At this point, as Jesus, I would be hoping for something like, “Can we be

allowed to host the Passover dinner to serve our fellow disciples?” or “Can you explain to us what we saw at the Transfiguration?” or “Can you tell us the meaning of the passages about the Lamb of God from the prophet Isaiah?” Instead, they replied, “Let one of us sit at your right hand and the other at your left in your glory.”

Now the writer of the Gospel did not describe Jesus’ facial expression at hearing these words, nor the tone of voice with which Jesus replied. However, I imagine it would have been something like the sled-assignment scene in the movie, *Cool Runnings*. *Cool Runnings* is based on the story of the first Jamaican bobsled team who recruit a disgraced former Olympic bobsledder to coach them. Three of the athletes, Derice, Yul, and Junior, are sprinters who missed out on representing their country at the summer Olympics because one of them tripped during the qualifying race. The fourth member of the team, Sanka, is Derice’s goofy, lazy, un-athletic best friend and well-known pushcart driver in Jamaica. In the scene, the coach, Irv, assigns Yul and Junior to the middle seats on the sled. Then Sanka steps up and this conversation follows:

Sanka: I'm the driver.

Irv: You're not. You're the brakeman.

Sanka: You don't understand, I am Sanka Coffie, I am the best pushcart driver in all of Jamaica! I must drive! Do you dig where I'm coming from?

Can you hear James and John in Sanka’s words? Now image the look on Irv’s face as he responds.

Irv: Yeah, I dig where you're coming from...Now dig where I'm coming from. I'm coming from two gold medals. I'm coming from nine world records in both the two- and four-man events. I'm coming from ten years of intense competition with the best athletes in the world...You see Sanka, the driver has to work harder than anyone. He's the first to show up, and the last to leave. When his buddies are all out drinking beer, he's up in his room studying pictures of turns. You see, a driver must remain focused one hundred percent at all times. Not only is he responsible for knowing every inch of every course he races, he's also responsible for the

lives of the other men in the sled. Now do you want that responsibility?

As Irv speaks, Sanka's face goes from indignation to surprise to nervous dread. He immediately agrees that Derice should be the driver.

Jesus was a lot more patient with James and John than Irv was with Sanka. Jesus could have berated the brothers for so many things: for not listening to what Jesus said was going to happen, for focusing on prestige instead of love and service, for asking such a question when Jesus had so many more important things on his mind. Instead of berating the brothers, Jesus simply says "You do not know what you are asking" and redirects the conversation to teach the disciples about priorities, again. "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave." The impatient, vindictive part of me wishes that Jesus had described for James and John exactly what it was they were asking for and that they could have been as thoroughly rebuked as Sanka. Thankfully, Jesus was a better teacher than that.

Today, I want to introduce you to a phrase that has been a recurring theme in much of my adult life. In the movie, *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, the audience is introduced to the character of Friar Tuck as he and a contingent of soldiers are traveling through Sherwood Forest with a wagon of wine barrels and coins. Robin of Locksley's woodsmen have set a trap for the soldiers and the friar is left to fend for himself. When Robin climbs onto the wagon, Tuck pretends to surrender. Then, when Robin is unsuspecting, Tuck kicks Robin in the face and off the wagon, and grabs the reins. As the friar speeds off victoriously into the forest with the wagon, he shouts, "Confess, Robin Hood, that Friar Tuck is a braver and wiser man than thy are!" Shortly thereafter, a low branch strikes the friar on the back of the head, knocking him off the wagon. Tuck, flat on his face on the ground and dazed, mumbles, "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away." Robin comes to stand over him and asks Tuck if he yields. The stubborn friar replies, rudely, and tries to bite Robin in the leg. In the very next scene, the audience sees the friar wearing the horse neck harness and pulling the heavy wagon into the woodsmen' camp. After Robin indicates

that the friar has gone far enough, the exhausted friar removes the harness and says seven words that are as unexpected as they are endearing because of their sincerity, “Thank you, Lord, for teaching me humility.”

“Thank you, Lord, for teaching me humility.” These are not fun words to say. The situations that elicit these words are not fun. These are the words of a high school student who is certain that, with years of practice, she can become good at basketball and learn to play the organ. These are the words of a study abroad student who thought herself gifted in languages...before she tried to learn Polish pronunciation and grammar. These are the words of a parent who, after caring for a cheerful and easy baby for a year, thought that she was ready to add a second child. “Thank you, Lord, for teaching me humility.”

A few weeks ago, when Pastor Norm showed me the lectionary readings for this week, I was delighted when I saw the Job 38 passage. This has been one of my favorite passages for a while now, a passage in which I have taken great comfort in times of struggle and uncertainty. For most people, this probably seems like an odd candidate for a source of comfort. After all, in the passage, God is interrogating Job...from a storm...not the interaction circumstances that one would usually look forward to.

To help explain why this is one of my favorite passages, I must first explain about two things I have learned in my study of science. Much of my time as a chemist-in-training was spent studying chemical reactions: why some reactions happen and some do not; how to predict what will happen when certain chemicals are mixed together; and how to control chemical reactions. Among the most important tools for controlling chemical reactions are catalysts: materials that make certain reactions go faster but are not one of the reactants or the products. When you study chemistry, you start with brute-force approaches: high temperatures, high pressures, long reaction times, lots of solvent, strong acids—approaches that get the job done but are frequently wasteful and dangerous. As you progress in your studies, the chemical reactions become more controlled, more eloquent. Catalysts allow reactions to run faster and cleaner, at lower temperatures and pressures, and with less and safer solvents. The yields of the desired products are higher and there are fewer side reactions. Little is wasted in terms of energy or materials. Catalyst design is an art that I

admire greatly and there has been much progress in the last 200 years. Yet, even good catalysts are not perfect. Many catalysts are made from precious metals and are difficult to manufacture. The performance of catalysts degrades over time as impurities build up. There are still side reactions and wastes. Eventually, catalysts have to be replaced.

Imagine my astonishment as a senior when I learned about catalysts that work very quickly, at room temperature and atmospheric pressure, in gentle solvents, with nearly perfect yields and almost no waste. What are these miraculous catalysts? The answer is enzymes: the proteins found in all living things that run biological chemical reactions. Proteins are made from long chains of amino acids. Each amino acid has two parts: a backbone part that links the other amino acids to form the chain and a unique side group part that determines the amino acid's chemistry. When thousands of amino acids are linked together, the chain folds into 3-D shapes as the side groups of the amino acids attract or repel each other. Most proteins are made from just 20 different types of amino acids. Yet, the right sequence of amino acids results in the perfect enzyme shape that can coax molecules into the just the right position to do the desired reaction...in water, at room temperature, perfectly. There is the eloquence and skill that I thought I had as a chemist, only to be outdone by the most common biology. "Thank you, Lord, for teaching me humility."

My second example has to do with measuring time. The history of science is a lot about the history of measuring devices. With each new improvement to a device comes an improvement in the ability to observe and understand the world. For example, think of how many more things you can see with a microscope or a telescope than with your eyes alone. In the children's book, *Sea Clocks: The Story of Longitude*, readers are introduced to the relationship between timekeeping and navigation in the 1700s. Navigators had long been able to track their latitude from the position of the sun and the stars. Knowing one's longitude, however, required an accurate way of knowing the time since one had left port. The book tells the inspiring story of John Harrison as he spends 40 years laboriously designing and redesigning a clock that will keep accurate time at sea. So much effort to achieve a level of consistency!

Recently, I have learned about the half-life of radioactive materials. Inside of atoms is a nucleus, made up of protons and neutrons. Some combinations of protons and neutrons are very stable, and the atom will stay the same. Other combinations of neutrons and protons are not stable, and over time, the atom will decay, that is, the atom's nucleus will give off some mass or energy to reach a more stable state. Half-life is the amount of time that it takes half of the atoms with that number of neutrons and protons to decay. This decay process is remarkably consistent, so much so that measuring the rate of emissions from a material can tell you what the material is. Let me put this in perspective. Imagine a stadium full of people holding up colored cards. At the start, all the cards are showing yellow. Over five minutes, just the right number of people flip over their cards to reveal the blue side such that, after 5 minutes, half of the cards in the stadium are blue. After another 5 minutes, $\frac{3}{4}$ of the cards are evenly blue around the stadium, and so on. Now imagine that you were tasked with coordinating all of the people so that they flip over their cards at just the right time. Inside of materials, there are not thousands or even millions of atoms; there are many more than that. And yet, evenly throughout the material, the atoms decay so consistently that you can make the most accurate clocks in the world from tracking the emissions from the decays. What power there must be to coordinate such perfection!

With these two examples in mind, let's revisit the story of Job. The book of Job has 42 chapters. By the time of our reading in Chapter 38, a lot has happened. At the start of the book, Job's situation aligned with the view that many people have of God and blessings: if one is good and well-behaved, God will bless you. Job was faithful and righteous. Job had been blessed with everything at that time that one could want: a large family, land, herds of domestic animals, good health, and the respect of his neighbors. Enter Satan. Satan suggests to God that Job is only faithful because of all of his good fortune and asks God if he can take that away from Job to see what if Job's faith will change. God allows it and by verse 19 of the first chapter, Job learns of multiple catastrophes: a fire and raids that kill his servants and take away his livestock, and a windstorm that kills his children. In spite of his shock and grief, Job reacts remarkably and proves Satan wrong: we hear in verse 21, Job says,

“Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away, may the name of the LORD be praised.”

In Chapter 2, Satan tries again, this time being allowed to take away Job’s health with a terrible and itchy skin condition. To add insult to injury, Job’s wife tells him to stop holding on to his integrity, to curse God and die. Still, Job keeps his head and replies, “...shall we accept good from God and not trouble?” So far, so good. Still keeping the faith.

The straw that broke the camel’s back starts in Chapter 2, verse 11, when three of Job’s friends and one other, younger man, come to “sympathize” with Job. At first, they keep vigil silently, then, one at a time, they lecture Job on what he must have done wrong to have deserved such misfortune. There are multiple speeches and multiple replies from Job...35 more chapters worth. Job continues to protest his innocence of all the “special” sins his friends brainstorm for him. At one point, Job asks God for a hearing since he believes God has treated him unfairly.

It is into this context, that we hear from God: from Chapter 38:

² “Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge?”

God is asking Job how he could have interpreted what was going on so badly. The misfortune that Job was suffering was not punishment. Job’s faith was being tested and taught discipline. God’s plan, which we learn about in the epilogue, included Job’s restoration.

³ “Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me.”

And on into the questions that Job, nor any of us, can answer. God is reminding Job of things we try to forget: God is the author of nature and keeps it running without our understanding or help.

God is good and does not distribute justice according to our limiting thinking. He knows our stubbornness and rebellion. He knows our selfishness and shortsighted priorities. Even when we try our best, he knows we will fall short. And yet, God found a way to let us keep our free will and still satisfy his requirement for justice.

Sometimes, bad things do happen as the result of our poor choices. For example, I know what will happen if I stay up to late to finish a book, or don’t take my coat on an autumn day, or put off that task I don’t like. Few of

us make it through life without our choices causing hurt to others or the choices of others causing harm to us.

Sometimes, God allows struggles and setbacks in our lives so that we learn compassion or so that we are stronger for the future. For example, my failures as a student and as a parent have given me empathy and wisdom to better counsel the students under my supervision. Real life has beaten the perfectionism out of me, and now the anxiety about not being perfect is no longer as debilitating as it once was.

Sometimes, God allows sickness, disability, and weakness so that his love and power can be seen (think of the people that Jesus healed), or so that others have a chance to serve and love us.

And sometimes, there are heartbreaking tragedies and injustices that God allows to happen for which we will not see the purpose and that we will never understand. I do not have answers for these. Since the advent of sin in the Garden of Eden, the world has not been as God created it to be. What I do know is that God is aware of what we are experiencing. Jesus felt pain and rejection, exhaustion and loss. God has not left us stranded to manage on our own. He sent Jesus to live the perfect life that we cannot and to take on himself for us the most dire consequence of an imperfect world: death and separation from God.

If I were to rewrite the words of Job 38 to capture the comfort that I have knowing that God is in control over what I (in my grief or pain or panic) cannot see, cannot comprehend, or cannot do for myself, it would go something like this:

Then the LORD spoke to me and said:

Who is this that darkens my council with words without knowledge?

Where were you when I set the chemistry of the magma to make new land form and tectonic plates to shift in earthquakes?

What did you contribute when I made ice less dense than water so that creatures of the lakes and seas can survive when the surface freezes?

Who chose amino acids as the building block for the machines that run the body, and gave the sequences to ensure the shapes folded perfectly?

Who ordained the composition of blood so that cells receive oxygen and energy, cuts are sealed, and harmful bacteria are captured?

Who coordinates the interactions of atoms, so that stars burn to give heat and light, and time can be marked by radioactive decay?

Where were you when I made microorganisms in the soil to work together with plants, or gave fungi the secrets to break down the toughest wood?

Do you orchestrate the patterns of the snowflakes?

Do you hold the earth in its orbit around the sun or time its rotation?

Therefore, be still, my child, and know that I am God.

Let us pray:

Heavenly father, thank you for teaching us humility. We are in awe of your power and even more so of the grace that have shown your disciples and us. Help us to recognize the things that we can control so that we can use our gifts to serve our neighbors. At the same time, remind us of the things that are beyond our understanding and help us to trust in your plans.

When days of loss and heartache do come, help us to lean on Jesus and to say with Job, from chapter 1 verse 21 and from chapter 19 verse 25:

“The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.”

“For I know that my Redeemer lives.”

Amen.