

CARVING OUR FAITH

Sermon by Susan James

Damascus United Methodist Church

Job 38:1-7, 34-41; Psalm 104: 1-9; Hebrews 5:5-10; Mark 10:35-45

Laity Sunday -- October 18, 2009

Fall is here! If this dreary rain hasn't sent you the message, then how about a brighter sign – a pumpkin!

Now if you love this autumn season, or if you have children, you may find yourself headed to an actual pumpkin patch. Little children can spend forever trying to find just the right pumpkin. However, if you are very lucky as a young parent, an older parent will pull you aside and whisper, "Tell them there's one rule in pumpkin picking. They have to be able to carry their own pumpkin."

Our own resident pumpkin expert (you know that DUMC has experts on practically everything!) is Wendy Hembrough. She has been helping people carve pumpkins for the last 16 years. Wendy says she's learned that everyone has their own idea of the perfect pumpkin. Some people want a precisely round shape or a deep orange color. Others say it isn't a real pumpkin if it doesn't have the stem attached. Still others go for the exotic look – more green or brown, or with a mottled surface. But whatever the choice, it's the promise of that pumpkin – what we might do with it, how we might carve it – that fills us with anticipation.

All of this talk about pumpkins got me to thinking... in a way, isn't this how we are with our own faith? We want to choose it and put our arms around it. We want to feel that this faith, this relationship with God, is truly ours. We want to carve it, understand it, use it.

Today's readings are all about the search for that proverbial pumpkin – a faith that is personal and meaningful and most of all, empowering. In fact, the very people we meet in today's readings give us insight into our relationship with God and what we might – indeed what we should do about it.

Take James and John, for example, in the Gospel. For a short time, their relationship to God seems to be all about the seating chart in heaven. They say, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." Can you imagine? They then proceed to say they would like to be seated to at Jesus' right and left sides. It's actually a pretty funny moment, but can't we all think of times where we have wanted God to do exactly what we want?

Then there is the heartache of Job. He thought he had done everything right by God and that's why his life was fantastic: Family, property, celebrations, health. But then, it was all taken from him. He just couldn't understand. He wanted to pin God down to an explanation that would make sense to him on human terms.

This struggle to try to understand God on human terms is indeed very human. But Karen Armstrong, a famous theologian, says our desire to pin God down has actually gotten

worse over the centuries. In her new book, called A Case for God, she explores all of the world's major religions to see how people everywhere from ancient times until today have tried to experience and understand God. She explains that until about the 16th century, human beings more or less accepted the fact that they couldn't possibly understand everything that happened in life. However, with the advent of scientific discoveries, there was a change, a shift, in people's thinking. More people wanted to account for everything in human terms, in ways that could be scientifically documented and catalogued. This attitude, she says, has led to an increase in atheism. Armstrong cautions that religion was never supposed to provide easy, pat answers. The task of religion, she says, is "to help us live creatively, peacefully and even joyously with realities for which there are no easy explanations." The danger in reducing everything to human terms is that we lose our ability to revere the mysteries of life that are beyond us.

Ironically, that's just what God says to Job. God questions Job's premise that he should understand everything. God asks Job, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" In listening to God, Job ultimately changes his perspective and says, "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand."

So what can we do when we get stuck trying to measure God by our dimensions? One thing is to catch ourselves thinking this way. A popular book from more than fifty years ago was called Your God is Too Small. This book is still in print. The author talks about the different ways Christians have reduced God to human boundaries.

Sometimes, when I feel overwhelmed and cannot for the life of me figure out how a problem is going to be solved, I find it helpful just to say the title of that book to myself: "Susan, your God is too small."

The psalms provide another inspiration. Today's psalm gives us immediate help in remembering God's magnificence: "Praise the Lord, O my soul," it reads. "O Lord my God, you are very great...."

But is saying "God is great" enough? Can we really just sit back and say, "Okay, God, I get it! I'll just worship your magnificence while you take care of everything else. Oh, and by the way, do you mind if I make a couple of requests?"

Not so fast. Jesus' response to James and John about their fantasy seating chart tells us very quickly this plan is not going to fly. In fact, his response to them is a work order: "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and who ever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." If we want to know God, if we want to be close to Jesus, we'd better to get moving!

In God's kingdom, we all have work to do...some pumpkin carving if you will.... Our dear friend Wendy says when you look at a pumpkin, you simply cannot tell what it's going to be like to carve. A pumpkin can be absolutely gorgeous, perfect on the outside, but when you start to carve it, you find out it has incredibly tough skin or a thick wall that is hard to penetrate. How about us? Has our own thick skin made it hard to hear what is required of us?

And what about when we get discouraged? Wendy talks about how she's seen many people get frustrated or disappointed the first time they try to carve a pumpkin. They look at their carving efforts and say "I'm no good. I can't do this. I've ruined it."

How many of us have felt that way at different times in our lives? "I'm no good. I can't do this. I've ruined it."

But then – and this is my favorite part – Wendy takes the discouraged pumpkin-carver aside. She takes them to a darkened room, and gives them a little tea light to put inside their pumpkin. And when they light up that pumpkin, it doesn't matter what kind of job they have done carving: that lit-up pumpkin even in its imperfection looks beautiful. That light shines through their imperfect efforts all the same.

To me, that's how it is when we ask for the magnificent light of God shine to through our human efforts.

The real question is: are we giving other people tea lights? Are we encouraging each other, or are we holding the light where only we can see it? The reading from Hebrews today talks about how the high priest can help the wayward and ignorant precisely because he himself is weak and imperfect. If you read a little further, you find out we are *all* called to be priests to each other. So says Hebrews 10:25: "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us encourage one another."

Perhaps there has never been a time when encouraging one other has been more important. Many church denominations, including the United Methodist Church, are experiencing continuing declines in membership. Yet I have always appreciated how the Methodist Church is very clear about how we can encourage each other: with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service. Well, in June of this year, the United Methodist Conference made a decision to add a fifth word to this list. The word they added was "Witness."

Friends, what a wonderful reminder for our work as Christians: our witness. Did we not see just last weekend the beautiful witness of our newest missionary Amanda Jones? And how about our own Peace Corps volunteers, Alicia Feuillet and Kelsey Holmes? This week, we'll be sending a delegation of nine DUMC members on a mission trip to South Africa. So, too, our own youth choir has witnessed through music all the way from Southern California up to Maine, and that's just in the last two years. And every time I see Linda Motter up on this altar, I am reminded of how witness can be transformed into the call to ministry.

I'm going to end with one last story about a witness. Remember when I said the continued discoveries of science have undermined some people's attitudes toward faith? Well, some scientists have found the opposite to be true – the more we learn, the more the magnificence and mystery of God is revealed.

Twenty years ago, I interviewed the man who had just discovered the gene for cystic fibrosis -- Dr. Francis Collins. This discovery had huge implications for many diseases. Dr. Collins went on to head the International Human Genome Project, to map out all 3

billion pieces of our genetic code. Recently, he was confirmed as the director of the National Institutes of Health, a job that could be considered the top medical research position in our country.

But in 2006, Dr. Collins took a break from his scientific studies to write a book called The Language of God. Dr. Collins believes that faith in God and science can indeed coexist and that science actually illuminates the work and the language of God. Yet writing this book, being a witness, has not come without a cost. Less than two weeks ago, The New York Times published attacks on Dr. Collins's "outspoken religious commitment."

Witnessing isn't always easy. That is why we've got to support each other. Today, after the second service, we will be sharing our witness at the United Methodist Charge Conference. This is where we give an accounting of all our church has done this past year and plans for the future. May God help us continue to carve our faith in this community and in the world beyond. And may each pumpkin we see remind us in some small way of the faith that we share and the light we can bring through Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God.