

In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen

It is my observation that in this digital age, in this computer culture, that we are becoming more fascinated and reliant on systems. We judge what is happening around us by systems, and we plan our response to those situations systematically. It seems the right thing to do. But I am wary of systems, so it makes me uneasy. Not that I don't care for systems; I love to invent them, but following them? Not so much! I often find systematic thinking confining, and while adherence and faith, even to a system I myself have devised, might bring predictability and reassurance, it also often inhibits revelation, insight, and new ideas. Some like to think of our relationship with God as systematic, a relationship which is faithfully defined by some organized scheme, some irrefutable and reliable doctrine, an assumption. Problem is, when that doctrine is too specific or rigid, the growth of our relationship with God can be artificially restricted. So, I am wary of systems, understanding their value, but vigilant against their inhibitions.

The Bible can be like that, too. Scholars have spent thousands of years systematizing the Bible message, making it a closed book, an open and shut case. But in doing that, I fear that some have inhibited the genius of those Biblical writers who pushed out against the edge of the envelope, who integrated storytelling, hyperbole, spiritual insight, heroes and villains, drama, crises, poetic vision, and all manner of motif into their sincere hope to broaden the regard their readers had for a relationship with the divine. And, did any of them realize that their works would retain their significance for thousands of years?! Would the author of the Book of Job have expected that we would be reading his or her work yet today? Whoever that author was, isn't it an interesting fictional literary device to have God and the devil sitting around, maybe in lawn chairs, having a casual debate about human nature? Now, that's pushing the edge of the envelope! And not to be taken literally, of course. Episcopalians, BTW, are known to say that they take the Bible seriously, but not literally. For some reason, our lectionary selection today then skips over the part about Job's comfortable, prosperous life described in the rest of chapter one, and we find him destitute and argumentative with his wife. Stay tuned, we're going to hear more about his life in the coming weeks.

Jesus is quoted as pushing the edge of the envelope, too, in Mark's gospel account. The Pharisees have a system they think is tried and true and endorsed by God, but Jesus wants them to think outside the box. Children are important. Women are important. Marriage is important enough that it should not be entered lightly, that when God has truly joined two individuals they ought not be separated by outside forces or fidelities. When that happens, it isn't God's love which has failed, it is a flaw in the system. Something about the written code has broken down, whether it is a digital code or a legal one. Look to your souls, Jesus says, not to your systems. Personally, I think we should regard the scriptures thematically rather than systematically, and there seem to be four primary themes in the Biblical experience. Those four might be called Creation, Sin, Judgement, and Redemption. These four themes, presented by the Biblical authors in many inventive and memorable ways, seem to lead us towards a richer and more inspiring perspective on our faith. Creation, Sin, Judgement, and Redemption. Putting them in order like that makes them seem like a system rather than a revelation, but please bear with me and I'll try to explain what I think is the difference.

Creation is a gift, a gift from God to all the creatures. We like to call it God's dream, God's vision, God's initial initiative. It reveals both God's love and God's ideal. It is described poetically in

the Bible, beginning with the gift of light, the gift of enlightenment. It then proceeds as a process, and God's intentions begin to take shape. But not just in the shape of things, but also in the form of opportunities, opportunities for loving relationships, for new life, for growth and development. God's dream, we think, is a creative one, one which continues and persists, showering us with so many possible alternatives that we scarce can take it all in. And by our free will, by that gift of enlightenment, and by accepting the advice of God's own Holy Spirit, we are meant to make good choices. But there are problems. Not with God's dream and vision, but with the way the world receives that dream. The Biblical record names it Sin. It might be the result of poor choices and it might also be the result of chaotic streams of thought and behavior, and it might just be that that thing we conceptualize as evil. Job, unaware of the fictional deal which has been struck among the heavenly beings, has made no bad choices, has done nothing wrong, but yet has severe problems. Call it sin, but recognize that it isn't, in his case, anything personal...it's just a quirk, a problem, an unfortunate event. Sin is in the world, and apparently defies deletion.

So, there two dynamics influencing our relationship with God, says the Bible: Creation and Sin. And then there is a third: Judgement. While Creation and Sin seem to be tugging us in different directions, we are suddenly brought up short by Judgement. Call it consequence, call it unintended consequence, call it bad karma, call it even being blindsided by no fault of our own, we find ourselves disorientated, confused and frequently miserable. We wonder if we have been abandoned by God, if we have somehow fallen out of favor with God and man. Job's question is a bit more philosophical. He asks his wife the rhetorical question, "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" But there is, in fact, a loving response from God, according to the scriptures: Redemption. God loves the creatures of creation enough to redeem them, to rescue them. No matter what. We call this 'grace', and Christians are devoted to the belief, in their hearts, that Jesus Christ is the embodiment of that grace, worthy of the title 'Savior'. As creation is a gift, so too is redemption. God does not abandon the beloved creatures, but rescues them for the sake of love. God blesses them, blesses them for the purpose of the initial vision, that they may be agents in the fulfilling of the dream. Despite sin and the ravages of judgement, God can make all worthy, intends to make all worthy, to participate in making the dream come true.

Creation, Sin, Judgement, Redemption...that sounds for all the world like a system, doesn't it?! But here's the thing: These components are not in a linear progression along some historical, systematic timeline; they are, in fact, all happening at once. At any given moment, our relationship with God, whether individually and personally or corporately and publically, includes all these things. In the midst of creativity, there are pesky problems. In the midst of unintended consequences, there is a rescue effort going on. God's choppers are flying low and close to pick us up off the rooftops of homes which are threatened by flood or wildfire. I'm not saying that Jesus has rotors...that probably doesn't rise to the level of Biblical metaphors...but you see what I mean: In our relationship with God, you can expect that creation, sin, judgement, and redemption will be taking place simultaneous. Don't mistake this for chaos, because it isn't. Don't assume that you have been abandoned, because you haven't. Instead, I suggest you bind all this together, thematically, by prayer. Our loving covenant relationship with God finds its richness in communicating and communing with God. In whatever form of prayer seems most accessible to you, pray with thanksgiving for creative opportunities; pray confessionally for the problems, pray honestly about the consequences, and pray constantly to be rescued. It's not a system, it's a way of life. Amen