

## Sermon: Stewarding for Loss

Year B, Proper 23

[Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Psalm 22:1-15; Amos 5:6-7, 10-15; Psalm 90:12-17; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31](#)

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Most of you know I was evacuated from my house in Andover a few weeks ago when somewhere around 80 homes caught fire because of gas leaks from an overpressurized gas main. The afternoon all this happened, nobody knew what was going on, so the town turned off the power in an attempt to prevent any other explosions. When everything went dark, I was up in my fourth-floor, apartment-style condo, pulling together what I would need for a while (passport, check book, sermon, preaching clothes, Piglet – my stuffed animal from when I was a little girl). Just the essentials. I have a folding, wheeled cart that I use to bring my groceries from my car to my house, so I planned to bump, bump, bump down the three flights of stairs like a mom with a baby stroller. There wasn't any real danger. The gas was off. But it had been a tense four hours with sirens going all the time. And we were under orders to evacuate.

When I got out in the hall, the emergency lights were on. They're not great, but they're better than pitch blackness. I got out into the hall and there was my neighbor, let's call him Mike. He has MS. He's tall, over 6', but like many folks with MS, pretty skinny. I asked him what he needed. "I need help down the stairs." "I'm not sure I'm strong enough to get you downstairs. But I won't leave you; I'll go get some young buck to help you down to your car." "No, no," he said, "I have the strength, but I don't have the balance." "Well, that I can help with."

So I would bump, bump, bump my homeless lady cart down to a landing, then come back up the stairs to Mike. He'd hold onto a railing and my shoulder and I'd go down backwards. We'd get to the landing and he'd catch his breath while I bumped my cart down to the next landing. Now, the point of all this story telling is not that I'm some great heroine. Mike was fine and basically I was just a soft place for him to land if he fell forward. The point of this story telling was what happened on those shadowy stairs, where Mike was having trouble seeing the next step down so he could secure his footing.

People passed by us and didn't offer to help. Super skinny guy who walks with a cane, going down, step, together, step, together, preceded by a plus sized lady absolutely dripping with sweat. I wouldn't expect anyone to manhandle my cart downstairs. But shine a flashlight so Mike could see the stairs better? Ask if you could help? I didn't say anything, because everything that popped into my head was pretty much a string of f-bombs. And I'm a little sensitive to people thinking ministers are judge-y and I was being super judge-y at that point. I got Mike and my cart downstairs, and out to our cars. He headed to his son's house. I went to my folks' place in Maine. It all ended fine for both of us.

In today's reading from Hebrews, it says *And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account* (Hebrews 4:13). "Laid bare to the eyes" is a single word in Greek. It's a word that means a wrestling hold where you have someone by the throat and they can't move their head.<sup>1</sup> That same word is also used to

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *The Letter to the Hebrews*. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), 41.

describe when someone who has been found guilty in court must face the public with a knife under the chin, so they can't avoid seeing their dishonor reflected in everyone's eyes.<sup>2</sup>

The people who passed by Mike and I that night were looking down. Of course they were. They were going down stairs. But they had their heads tucked low and they were not meeting my eyes. I wasn't saying anything, but I was giving them the "What the? What the?" look. They were not laid bare to my eyes and they were not going to lay themselves bare to my eyes either. I can't speak to what was going on inside their heads, in their souls and spirits, in their joints and marrow (Hebrews 4:12). But I can tell you that they put a great deal of effort into not meeting my eye, not saying anything as they passed us going downstairs. Maybe they were in shock or getting to relatives who had blown up or had kids stranded at daycare or something. But they gave me the impression of what I am like when I am not being the person I want to imagine myself being and I don't want to admit it.

Now maybe that is super judge-y, completely without grace or mercy (Hebrews 4:16). OK. Not "maybe." It was super judge-y. Because I had no idea. They might simply have been terrified and trying to get out of an enormous brick building which if it had had gas in the basement would now be orbiting Saturn the explosion would have been so big. It had been a truly awful afternoon of sirens and helicopter chop and worried texts coming in from all over. Everyone else could watch the news. Those of us in the heart of the story couldn't see anything but our local area, and that was *full* of any vehicle with a light bar and a siren. You may not know much but when you're getting a link to a Washington Post report from your sister in Hong Kong, you know it's bad.

Maybe those people were feeling like Job. Job just wants to lay his complaint before God, like he would with any reasonable person Job had a beef with (Job 23:4-7). Job hadn't done anything wrong. His life had blown up around him and it wasn't his fault. There's nothing he could have done differently. Yet he was all alone. Job isn't even asking God for comfort or to shield him with the greatness of God's power (Job 23:6). Job just wanted God to show up. But no matter where he looked, Job couldn't find God (Job 23:8-9).

We do stewardship year-round because you don't know when the gas line is going to be overpressurized and the lights are going to go out. You don't know when you are going to pass a super skinny guy creeping down the shadowy stairs. You don't know when something is going to happen to you through no fault of your own and you're going to feel all alone. We do stewardship year-round so we have assembled the resources to meet those moments. Yes, we want to be able to give financial assistance to people who need it when they are staring at the smoking cellar hole that used to be their home. We want to have a predictable, safe and beautiful place to gather where we feel much more confident of meeting God. But we do stewardship year-round because at some point all of us are going to be standing in a poorly lit hallway and a guy with a cane is going to walk toward us. That's the moment we have to make the call of who we are and who we want to be when we are *laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account* (Hebrews 4:13).

We do stewardship year-round so that when something like that happens, the people it happens to can come back to us and tell us what it was like. Since that person most recently was me, let me share three things I learned. One: people tell me they don't go to church because they don't

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<sup>2</sup> Barclay, 41.

want to be judged. I get what they're saying. But here's the thing they don't get. If I truly accept, as Hebrews says that *the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart* (Hebrews 4:12), if I truly accept that, then I don't have to judge myself. I don't have to go creeping down the stairs avoiding eye contact with the totally-sweaty chick who is glaring at me. No matter how judgmental I was on those stairs that night, and I was judgmental on anabolic steroids, I was not judging them more harshly than they were judging themselves.

Two: If I truly accept, as Hebrews says that in Jesus we have a high priest who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses, who in every respect has been tested as we are (Hebrews 4:15), then I can admit to Mike that I may not be able to give him what he needs. I can imagine a number of different people who wouldn't have given it a second thought to getting Mike down three flights of stairs. I have to admit that when he said he had the strength to get down, I doubted him. But I figured if that if he was wrong and he needed more help, we would figure it out together. I'm not going to fail in God's judgment because I acknowledge my limitations.

Three: And I didn't realize this until later. Like when I was writing for this week's service. If I truly believe as Hebrews says *Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need* (Hebrews 4:16), if I truly believe that, then there was no need for me to judge the people going by Mike on the stairs. At one point or another, we are all the person who needs help down the stairs, and we are all the person who can help but maybe not completely and we are all the person walking by somewhat ashamed not to offer help. Christ invites all of us to approach the throne of grace with boldness and receive mercy. If I had remembered that in time, I could have just smiled at the folks going by. I could have said, "Hey, Mike and I are doing fine, but if you could spare 10 minutes to hold a flashlight so Mike could get a good look at the next step, that would help a lot." If they had helped at that point, great. If they had kept walking, I genuinely would have been able to pray that God watch over them in their time of trial.

So, to recap: 1. God judging me means I don't have to judge myself, 2. God will accept my weaknesses, and 3. since I will receive mercy and grace, so will everyone else. That makes life so much easier. That's why we do stewardship year-round. So we can stop doing things the hard way. So we can share with as many people as we come into contact with the Good News that it does not have to be so difficult. So that when we encounter Job sitting in the dust, or Mike at the head of the stairs, or neighbors creeping by in the shadows, we can say, we can know, we can live the reality that mercy and grace are with us always. Just do your best. Love God. Take care of each other. Be bold when you rest<sup>3</sup> in God's mercy and grace. You are never alone.

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<sup>3</sup> Ann Hoch Cowdery, "Hebrews 4:1-13." *Interpretation* 48, no. 3 (1994): 284.