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1 Samuel 17: (1a, 4 – 11, 19 – 23) 32 – 49

Ps. 9: 9 – 20

2 Corinthians 6: 1 – 13

Mark 4: 35 – 41

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In India, there is a folktale that goes like this:

Once upon a time, there was a beggar who was among the poorest of the poor. Each day, day after day, hour after hour, he sat along the dirt road that ran through the middle of his village in order to beg. He had no clothes other than the patched and stained rags that he had repeatedly stitched together. He sat upon a small mat of woven reeds that was also his bed at night. He had nothing but the rags on his back to protect him from the cold and damp at night.

Most days, the beggar would be given enough rice to make a very small meal for himself at night, and perhaps a few small coins with which to buy firewood. His only possession, a prized one, was the small bowl in which he mixed the few grains of rice with a little water from a nearby stream and then cooked the rice. And so, life continued for the beggar for a long time. Then, one day, news came that the emperor – the Emperor!! – was coming through this village the very next day on his way to make a state visit.

“Surely the emperor will be a good and saintly man,” thought the beggar. “Surely he will give me some good gifts as he goes by and not leave me with merely a handful of rice!” So, the next day, before the sun was up, the beggar was sitting in a spot by the road where the emperor could not possibly miss him.

The beggar did not have long to wait before the sound of the imperial procession began to fill his ears. Drum beats, horns and the sounds of the crowds got louder and louder as the emperor approached. Soon the sound of clopping horses’ hooves could be heard, and then even the wheels of the carriage as it drew near. The beggar was just about to spring up from his place by the side of the road and run out to the coach to beg for alms when, to his surprise, the emperor tapped on the side of his coach for the driver to stop.

The emperor himself stepped out of the carriage and came over to where the poor beggar waited with huge eyes. The crowd also waited, hushed with just as much surprise, as the emperor greeted the beggar warmly and humbly. Then, to everyone’s utmost astonishment – and especially the beggar’s – the *emperor* asked the *beggar* for a small gift of rice!

“What!?” thought the beggar, shocked and terribly disappointed, “am I, a beggar with nothing to my name, to give the few grains I have to this man who has everything?? Am I, struggling to survive yet another day, dependent on whatever I can glean from someone, to give away even that and leave my bowl *completely barren*?? Here is this rich and powerful man in front of me asking for it all from the poorest of the poor!” The beggar could scarcely conceal his indignation and shock, yet neither could he scarcely refuse the royal request.

And so, very reluctantly, and very begrudgingly, the beggar counted out five grains of rice from the tiny number that he had already begged that day. The emperor, for his part, accepted them most graciously, as if he had received the treasure that they indeed were. He thanked the beggar most sincerely, got back in his carriage, and went on his way.

That evening, after a rather slim day of begging – and one far more disappointing than had been hoped for – the beggar began to prepare the few grains of rice that he had left for his evening meal. As he cleaned the rice, he felt a small stone in it. But as he looked closer, he noticed the stone gleaming. Like gold. Yes, there was a nugget of gold in with the rice! And another. And another, and another and another! In fact, there were five gleaming nuggets of gold.

The beggar thought back to his encounter with the emperor. For each grain of rice that he had so reluctantly and so begrudgingly handed over to the emperor, there was a beautiful, glowing little nugget of gold gleaming up at him from the bowl. The emperor had repaid his unwilling gift with its equivalent in gold. “How mean and foolish I have been!” thought the beggar. “I wish that I had given the emperor EVERY grain of rice that I had!”

*[from Margaret Silf, “The Emperor’s Gift,” One Hundred Wisdom Stories from Around the World, Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2003]*

We don’t actually have much to give to God – or do we? In light of this parable, if we do give, then why? Is it in hope of gain, or is it simply out of gratitude? Does God *expect* us to give anything back? Well, if God the Creator *doesn’t* expect any action from us as created beings, then there really isn’t any point to any of Jesus’ parables, is there? There is no point to the stories of encounters with Jesus’ audiences that elicit faith responses, or to the stories of acts of trust (or sometimes lack thereof) on the part of Jesus’ disciples.

Today’s Gospel has to do with giving to God in a way that we don’t necessarily or usually think about, and in a way in which an exchange occurs. An exchange that – like the gold for rice exchange – can be rather surprising in our lives, if we are open to it. Our gift to God has to do with giving God room to act in ourselves and in our lives. Especially at those times when we think that we are running on empty, with just a few grains of rice to our name.

Today’s Gospel starts out in the evening after a long day of Jesus’ preaching and teaching. Jesus is very tired, so he says to his disciples, “Let’s go across the Sea of Galilee to the other side.” According to Mark, the disciples take him with them in the boat ‘just as he is.’ It’s a rather curious statement. It makes Jesus sound pretty ruffled and bedraggled, completely exhausted and very human. So, it isn’t a surprise that Jesus falls asleep in the bottom of the boat.

Now, the Sea of Galilee is about 13 miles long from north to south, and about 8 miles wide at its widest point, and it is proportionately very shallow. Think turkey platter versus soup tureen. So, it doesn’t take much wind to kick up some really big waves and create quite the storm. The Jewish people are not a seafaring nation, except for their fishermen – and even the disciples who *are* fishermen by trade fear this storm. Storms at sea – or even on this large lake – are seen as chaos or evil raising its ugly head and threatening to destroy God’s chosen people and God’s creation.

Now, Jesus can sleep through this storm, because he knows that God’s power is already present and is mightier than the fiercest storm. No need to worry. But what Jesus can’t sleep through are the panicky – some might say frantic – prayers of his friends (which is really pretty comforting for us to know). Jesus’ perspective is not shared by the disciples. They don’t know the rest of the story yet, so they’re angry at Jesus for seeming not to care about them and their plight.

In the Greek, the disciples’ response is that they “fear with a great fear,” something that the NRSV translation of “filled with great awe” doesn’t quite capture. I think if I was in the midst of a great

storm that very suddenly went to a glassy sea with a light breeze, I would be more terrified than awed as well. Who is this, the disciples want to know, who can control even the forces of evil in this world? These disciples went to Jesus in a panic only moments ago, and he has responded beyond their wildest imaginings.

Which brings us back to the idea of an exchange and what the disciples have to offer to Jesus. What do they have to offer to this person whom they have only recently gotten to know? A person who is so different from anyone else they have ever known. A person who can do things and say things that no one else can. A person who has powers far beyond what they can comprehend and who doesn't seem to need anything from them. What could they have to give?

Well, they have this panic-filled, anxiety-driven moment of their lives to give. It is their opportunity to give up every bit of who they are at this moment in their poverty of spirit. What they have to give God are their fears: their fear of not being in control; their fear of their demise; their fear of complete helplessness. They have their emptiness and barrenness to give.

Many, if not most, of us have experienced at least a taste of this in some form or fashion. We have had occasions – and chances are good that we will have more – when we have felt as though we have had absolutely nothing left to give God. Certainly not anything that God could possibly want, anyways. And yet, we are not nothing.

We have the one thing to offer God that God most longs for: ourselves. Giving ourselves to God enables God's power over all things in heaven and on earth to be revealed through us and in us. And God will take whatever space we give God and use it. God will act in proportion to however many grains of rice we take out of our stash and give. We are asked to give up our grains of anger or fear or anxiety or insecurity or helplessness or regret or control or whatever it is that fills us up on the inside. We are asked to give them up in order to make room for God to come in. And in return for this surrender, this making room for God, in the midst of impossible trials and testings, in the midst of imponderable life events and inscrutable relationships, God returns to us gold beyond measure.

Sometimes, it is the storms around us, and sometimes it is the storms inside of us, that bring us to God, to the One whom the seas and the winds obey. The cost is the exchange of the un-surrendered parts of ourselves in return for the gold of God's indwelling. Something we cannot begin to imagine when we are filled instead with panic, or doubt, or distrust, or fear, or self-concern, but something we cannot imagine being without once we have seen the light.

Hark! The Emperor comes. Do you have any rice to give? +