

Reality Check

a sermon

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Mark 10:35–45

Job 38:1–7, 34–41

Sooner or later, every single one of us experiences a reality check. Usually sooner.

What's a reality check? The dictionary definitions are somewhat helpful: a reality check is “an occasion on which one is reminded of the state of things in the real world.” (Thank you, Google.) It's “an action taken to reconcile somebody's ideas or desires with reality” (Thank you Encarta. May you rest in peace.)

But who needs a dictionary. *We* know what reality checks are. We know on a deep and personal level. We know because, hey, we and reality checks, we go way back.

When you learned that it wasn't smart to stick pennies in the power outlet, that was a reality check.

When you realized that, no, you couldn't in fact eat seven hot dogs and, uh, be happy afterwards, that was a reality check.

When you were told, “No, you may not stay up all night,” that was a reality check.

When you heard those famous words, “Because I said so!” — you came face to face (or worse) with a reality check.

When your older brother told you to get lost? Reality check.

When your dreams of going to the prom with that dreamy one who made your heart go all woozy didn't pan out? Yup. Reality check.

These reality checks don't stop once you become an adult. They keep on coming,

putting boundaries in your life,
putting limits on your expectations,
giving you perspective,
giving you heartburn.

They remind you of what you

cannot do,
may not do,
should not do.

And they pester you about what you *must* do:

your responsibilities,
your obligations,
the cold content of your adulting.

For many, reality checks come in the form of, well, *checks*: checks to write, bills to pay, groceries to buy.

For some, reality checks are heralded by “the pitter-patter of little feet,” a reality check that gets louder and louder as the feet get bigger and bigger, until they leave the house, and quiet returns, bringing in the silence another reality check.

In mid-life and into old-age, the reality checks become both more mental and more physical, telling us that our bodies are no longer able to do what they used to do, telling us that we may have forgotten more than we remember.

So it is with reality checks.



Job got a reality check.

Maybe you know about Job. In this ancient story told in the Bible, there was this man, named Job.

He was good. He was wealthy. He was highly esteemed among the people, and upright before God.

God loved him. God delighted in him. God had blessed him richly.

But then this shadowy figure, named “the Accuser,” came before God, and convinced God to test Job’s faithfulness. How would this test happen? By taking away all Job’s riches, all his children, and then even his health.

So, that’s what happened. Catastrophe followed upon catastrophe, until Job was left poor and sick and childless, sitting in sackcloth and ashes, covered from head to toe with pus-filled sores he scraped with a piece of broken pottery. In his misery, his wife stood over him, scolding him, urging him to curse God and die.

And then Job was visited by three friends. They wanted to help him, but, well, they weren’t really much help.

They offered simplistic platitudes. “Oh, I know how you feel.”

They served up vacuous theology. “It must be God’s will.”

Gee, thanks.

Job was no better off.

And then, after all that talk from Job’s friends, and from Job himself, *who* should speak, but *God*?

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind:

“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?”

God, it seems, had had enough. God, apparently, was quite fed up with all of this *talk*. After all, Job and Job’s friends were discussing *God*, speaking for *God*. And God did not like what was being said.

It was all so presumptuous, what they were saying. Job and his know-it-all friends, they were tossing around “God questions” and dabbling in “God-talk”

as if they really could speak for God,
as if they could tell what God was doing,
as if they had any idea what God should do.

God had had enough, and so God spoke up. Out of a whirlwind, God spoke to Job, with a voice mighty and fearful and probing:

“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?”

Translation: “none of you know what you’re talking about!”

And God went on: “I’m going to ask you some questions. Answer me, if you can! Where were *you* when I laid the foundation of the earth? Hmmmm?”

And what follows is a beautiful, overwhelming, terrifying interrogation by God.

*Can you lift up your voice to the clouds,
so that a flood of waters may cover you?*

*Can you send forth lightnings,
so that they may go and say to you, ‘Here we are?’*

*Who has put wisdom in the inward parts,
or given understanding to the mind?*

*Who has the wisdom to number the clouds?
Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens,
when the dust runs into a mass
and the clods cling together?*

How great is our God! How marvelous are God’s works!
How small, how weak, how limited

are Job,
and his friends,
and me,
and you.

Now that’s a reality check!



One day, two disciples of Jesus, James and John, took Jesus aside to talk to him. They had a proposal for him. They asked him for a promotion.

“Have us be your vice-presidents, Jesus!”

“Yeah, Jesus, I could be in charge of production, and he could be in charge of distribution!”

Yeah. Right.

Actually, what they said was this: “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”

Close enough.

And then comes the reality check. Although, James and John didn’t get it at first. They didn’t realize that it *was* a reality check.

Jesus asks them, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?”

“Cup”?! What is Jesus talking about? What’s this “cup” business?

Well, Jesus was using an image from the Old Testament. And there we find two different kinds of cups.

In the Psalms we find talk about “the cup of salvation,” like in Psalm 116:

*I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the LORD.*

Sometimes this cup of salvation is called “the cup of blessing.”
But we also find in the Old Testament talk about a cup of *wrath*, such as in Isaiah 51:

*Rouse yourself, rouse yourself,
stand up, O Jerusalem,
you who have drunk at the hand of the LORD
the cup of his wrath,
who have drunk to the dregs
the bowl of staggering.*

Two cups: a cup of blessing, and a cup of wrath, both of them mentioned in the Bible, each of them possibilities for what Jesus meant when he talked about “the cup.”

So, when Jesus asked James and John if they can drink the cup Jesus drinks, which cup did he mean? Did he mean the cup of blessing, or the cup of wrath?

Well, it is clear to us, now, with the benefit of time and context, with the benefit of knowing the whole story, that Jesus meant not the cup of blessing, but the *other* cup, the cup of wrath. He meant suffering. He meant sorrow. He meant his own passion and death.

But those disciples, which cup did *they* think he meant?

Obviously, their minds grasped only one possibility. They immediately thought of only one cup, and it is clear which one they had in mind. “Are we able to drink Jesus’ cup? Are we able to drink the cup of salvation and blessing? You bet we are! Bring it on!”

And Jesus wept. Or slapped his hand to his forehead in frustration.

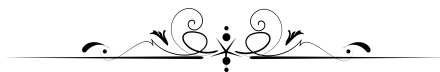
Silly disciples.

So Jesus has to make clear which cup he has in mind. It wasn’t the one James and John thought it was, not the cup of blessing. This cup, *Jesus’ cup*, is a cup of *suffering*. It’s a cup of serving and servant-hood. It’s a cup filled with pain, and heartache, and even death, after which, only afterwards, does it become the cup of salvation, on Easter morning, in resurrection.

And this is the reality check: those who aspire to follow Jesus are likely to share in that cup.

Jesus was telling them that if they want to be great in the kingdom of God, then they must drink from the same cup from which he drinks, they must share with him in his suffering, they must serve with him in his servant-hood.

Now that’s a reality check!



I must say: these scriptural reality checks humble me.

I think they’re supposed to.

I think we are supposed to feel humbled by them, to see ourselves in a light that takes the spotlight off of us, or that blindingly casts into relief the fact that we’re not all that.

But I also find these reality checks from scripture to be freeing. I hear them as grace-filled and hopeful. In them, I see gospel.

Again, I think we’re supposed to.

We are limited.
We are broken.
We are wounded.
We are not God. And we can't speak for God.
We don't have all the answers.

But, you know, we don't have to have all the answers. We don't have to ... describe in great detail who God is and what God is doing. We don't have to have the right answers

for the lonely,
for the sick,
for the dying,
for the bereaved,
for ourselves.

Jesus doesn't call us to have all the right answers. He calls us to follow him.
Jesus does not ask us to escape from reality. Jesus asks us to confront reality ...
... not on our own, not independently,

but with him,
under him,
in him,
because of him,
he who loves,
and serves,
and suffers.

Christ asks us to join him: in that same love, and service, and suffering, and in him to meet reality head on. He calls us to suffer in the process, to share in his cup of suffering, to echo in our own lives the suffering he endured.

The alternative is all-too common. Many people, perhaps many of us, have aspirations that begin and end with their own comfort, security, wealth, and health.

Jesus has a higher aspiration for us: that we should be his disciples. And what do disciples do?

They love.
They serve.

They are involved with the messiness of reality; they don't hide from it, but they confront it with the same spirit of love and servant-hood and willingness to suffer for the glory of God that was in Christ Jesus.

Now that's a reality check.



These scriptural reality checks, I think they also teach us about God. They remind me that God is so much more than any of us can fully comprehend, that God's ways surpass all we can ever do, or say, or know.

It's a funny thing about God: once you think you understand God, God shows you, yet again, that you don't quite have it. Knowing God is a road that moves ever onward, a path on which we are all invited to walk. Yet on that walk, we learn that God is not voiceless mystery, or a void into which we drop our questions and hopes and fears with never an answer in return. No, on that walk we learn to know God most truly in the face of Jesus Christ,

who walked in our midst,
who came not to be served but to serve,
who gave his life as a ransom for many,
who loved the broken,
the confused,
the wounded and the wounding,
who loved us.

He loved us then.

He loves us still.

And that, my dear friends, is the greatest reality check of all.



Sisters and brothers in Christ:

We have been called to follow Jesus.

Will we?

We have been summoned to serve God.

Will we?

We have been beckoned by Christ himself to encounter reality, to know our limits and to rise above our self-interest, to share in his suffering, and to share in his blessing..

Will we?

This is our reality check.

May God be glorified by our response!