

THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
Proper 24

October 18, 2009B

Job 38:1-7, 34-41
Mark 10:35-45

The readings today from The Book of Job and The Gospel of Mark speak of suffering. Who needs it? Who wants it? Whether it be a toothache that tells us we need to see a dentist, a heartache caused by disappointments in our relationships, struggles with depression, the loss of a loved one – or any number of painful experiences we face, suffering seems to be a part of our human experience.

Today is the third of a four week series of passages from The Book of Job. It's a real literary masterpiece, a dramatic poem, which uniquely looks at human suffering using vivid imagery to portray Job's ever faithful trust in God, even in the face of awful and inexplicable suffering. It raises questions like: If God is so good, why is it that so many people are subjected to so much pain and suffering? There are no easy answers to the mystery of suffering. In fact, our readings today may raise more questions and hopefully, at the same time, offer some insight into the mystery of suffering.

Job never listened to his friends who tried to tell him that the reason he was suffering so much was because of his sin and that he needed to repent. He knew his suffering wasn't the cause of anything he had done and he refused to accept their belief in God's 'pay back' suffering as a form of punishment for things he did. Job takes God to task for what Job perceives as God's indifference to the suffering in the world, including raising questions like why doesn't God help God's friends by taking a more active role in punishing evildoers? Job wants so much to talk with God in person, but when the moment came, it wasn't anything like he expected. God treats Job with respect and enters into a question and answer conversation with him as two people do when listening and responding to one another. God didn't demand repentance of Job nor did God chastise Job for questioning God. God's relationship with Job and Job's relationship with God was one which shows that we humans can argue, complain, be angry and express whatever we feel in our misery and suffering – and God will be there to listen, even if it feels in our suffering that God is as distant from us as the furthest star in the universe! God never answer Job's question of why a righteous person suffers. What we have, at the end of the story – and it's just a story, is the example of Job's trust and faithfulness to God in the midst of terrible suffering.

One of the best insights to The Book of Job I've gained comes from some reflections of the Rev. Herbert O'Driscoll. He writes: "In illness, financial disaster, troubles in our relationships, and other pains and sorrows, we all feel we have lost control over our

lives, and often we feel physically miserable...What Job wants is what every human being seeks when life goes terribly wrong – some meaning for what is happening.” And here’s why The Book of Job is so valuable to us, especially in moments when there are no easy answers. O’Driscoll writes: “Sometimes when we are suffering greatly and at the end of our resources, we feel almost guilty at our own weakness in letting everybody down. This passage offers the insight that to let go, to admit being lost and hopeless, and to want to end it all, is entirely natural. We see our humanity mirrored in Job” (*The Word Among Us*, Herbert O’Driscoll, Year B, Volume 3, pages 126-127).

I’ve never been comfortable with people who have pat answers to complex issues. This includes for me the difficult question of suffering. I think part of the uneasiness I’ve felt has to do with well-intentioned Christian folk who are very eager to tell others that Christ died for our sins, but who are unwilling or unable themselves to “be with” people in their own times of testing when faced, often painfully, with the mystery of suffering in their own lives. I’ve discovered through the painful moments of my own life that God was often present through people who unexpectedly and often in surprise-filled ways made the time to simply BE with me. Like the story of the ‘footprints in the sand,’ God was carrying me through the compassion and love of those willing to simply be with me in my struggles.

We serve others by helping them bear their load. And sometimes, the only thing we may have to offer is a “listening presence,” which requires a willingness to simply be there and listen. And as we know, it isn’t as easy as it sounds. It’s one thing, for instance, to share in the joys of our family, friends and community. But it can be much more difficult to be present to them in times of suffering, when what’s happening can’t easily be fixed, when we can’t adequately express our feelings because our words fail us - or because we might be on empty, feeling we have nothing tangible to offer.

In my first year here, I had received a call from an Episcopal priest from another part of the county, asking me if I would take time to visit a young couple at Pitt Memorial Hospital. One set of parents were members of the church he served. I joined them as they kept vigil at the bedside of their newly born son in the neonatal intensive care unit. Less than 24 hours after witnessing the birth of their first child, Ogdan, their joy and excitement changed to sorrow and pain as they watched helplessly while unexpected complications to his lungs and kidneys caused him to fight for his life while on a respirator. All I was able to do was simply be there. And when they called me later that night to come back to the hospital, Ogdan was brain dead. I knew my words couldn’t take away their pain. All I could do was to be there in their suffering, trusting that God was somehow present to them in the moment.

I didn’t have the knowledge or experience in my early days to know what I now believe about the mystery of suffering. And it’s this: our pain and suffering can be and often is transformed into new life. This happens not only in our own personal lives, but also in

the lives of others. God through Christ living in us, often uses us as instruments of God's hope and healing for others.

I often can see the hand of God at work in compassionate people willing to get involved with others. People, for instance, who have experienced the dark night of their souls through addiction to alcohol and drugs find the suffering and risen Christ in companions who mentor them through programs like AA and NA. Those who have known unbearable suffering through the death of a loved one often experience the stirrings of new life, transforming their pain into growth through the care and strength of a grief support group. The list can go on of the many ways God in Christ transforms pain and suffering into risen life, a life which finds new meaning and purpose through service to others.

For the third time in Mark's gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that he would suffer, be killed, and be raised to life again. But it falls on deaf ears. James and John seek the glory and privilege that they assume will come with their close friendship with Jesus. Instead, they are caught short by Jesus offering them a share in his own cup of suffering. "Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?" Jesus asks us. James and John didn't have the faintest idea of what they were saying when they said yes. They were dreaming of a time when the political dominance of Rome would be overthrown. Jesus would be king and have his own cabinet of ministers. They wanted to be his right-and left-hand men in the new political order. But it took them, as it takes us, a long time to realize to what we have said "yes" to, in our response as a disciple of Christ. It takes time for the gospel of Jesus to take root. It takes time to put into practice the message about being a servant instead of a master - and it takes time to trust God's presence in our lives, especially when faced with the mystery of suffering.

We will never really know "why" good people suffer in our sojourn here on earth. But what we do know, through the mystery of the life we live, is that our suffering can be transformed into new life and growth through the power of the suffering servant who is our Risen Lord. And, as a PS to this sermon during this Stewardship Season: When it comes to the mystery of suffering in *our life together as a parish family*, I suspect, from what I've seen, is that we're at our best when our pain and suffering, like compost in the midst of becoming good fertilizer, is transformed into compassionate care for others. It's a significant part of the time and "talent" we offer in service to others.

Let us pray: *"At every moment of our existence you are present to us, God, in gentle compassion. Help us to be present to one another so that our presence may be a strength that heals the wounds of time, and gives hope that is for all persons, through Jesus our compassionate brother"* (The Brothers of Weston Priory, Vermont).

Amen.