

There are some Sundays, I break my normal pattern. Change is sometimes good but it is always different. Today, I will stay in the pulpit because my sermon will lack its usual light nature and it is beyond my scope of memory.

An atheist is expected to ask the "Why?" of things. It's part of the practicing atheist's repertoire. But what if a believer asks "Why?" with an intensity even greater than that of the atheist? Well, the preacher responds with Job's help - the book and the person.

Our lectionary, for the most part in its three-year cycle, stays clear of Job. It is a rare day, like today, when this book is a part of the assigned readings. But we can never really elude Job for long. Job will at some point enter uninvited into our public and private worlds and demand a hearing.

Job is the haunting cry of the victim in an unjust world. Job is a nightmare that forms the day for countless human beings. Job is that core agnostic cry that asks "Why?" Job is the silent sigh or anguished cry of "Why is there so much indiscriminate suffering and pain in a world supposedly created by a loving God?" If God exists (if God is really God) and is all-powerful and personally involved with the process of creation, why then is there innocent suffering? Why does our world present us with all these problems, like the 12 year old Filippina who ask Pope Francis why do children suffer:

Job is an articulate probe into the shadow world of helplessness and hopelessness.

"Month after month I have nothing to live for; night after night brings me grief. When I lie down to sleep, the hours drag; I toss all night and long for dawn ... My days pass by without hope, pass faster than a weaver's shuttle" (Job 7:3, 4, 6). These are words from this morning's encounter with Job. The poetry, the style, the intelligence, and the insight into and identification with suffering, both physical suffering and mental-spiritual confusion, are of high genius and are marked by personal experience.

Job is a haunting challenge that you as well-educated Christians must be able and willing to face head-on if you are to be effective instruments of Christian mission in the corporate, educational, and medical worlds that you will serve. You must not only be able to confront intellectually and emotionally the questions asked by Job about a just God in a seemingly unjust world but also confront an even more intense, life-shattering challenge. Job, remember, is a believer. He is not an atheist. But as he expresses his life story and attempts to define its purpose, there can be discerned a growing estrangement, an ever-widening gulf in his relationship with God. His once-strong faith sinks down into an abyss of terror. No longer a whisper, but now a cry is heard that perhaps there is no meaning to all the everyday encounters that form our being; that just perhaps our lives are insignificant, that there is no rhyme or reason in the realm of destiny and the only hope for peace is to become dust again in death, in a return to the clay.

"If my troubles and griefs were weighed on scales, they would weigh more than the sands of the sea ..." (Job 6:1-3a), said Job, "I give up; I am tired of living. Leave me alone. My life makes no sense ..." (Job 7:16). "When an innocent man suddenly dies, God laughs. God gave the world to the wicked. He made all the judges blind. And if God didn't do it, who did?" (Job 9:23-24). Job digs under the skin of assurance and questions even the permanence and the integrity of love. I hear these questions so often here at the VA.

The book is divided into three sections. The first and last were probably written later than the major, middle core of poetry. The first section is a brief prologue in prose that sets the stage for the impact of pain in poetry that follows. The supernatural beings that compose the divine court check in, Satan among them. God asked Satan in chapter 1, verse 7, "What have you been doing?" Satan answered, 'I have been walking here and there, roaming around the earth.' 'Did you notice my servant Job?' The lord asked. 'There is no one on earth as faithful and good as he is ...' " Satan replied to this effect: "Well sure, you

have blessed him with good health, abundant family, and the largest cattle ranch in the world. I bet if you took away everything from him, Job would curse you to your face." God said, "You're on!"

Job is reduced to a penniless, old man with a diseased body. His progeny is snuffed out. Then follows the main body of the book, the oldest section, whispered through generations, 39 chapters of poetry. It is good poetry, poetry that cuts deeply into the soul of things. Job calls out for justice, a call for the touch of peace to an innocent person in the process of being apparently randomly destroyed.

"I've lost all hope," said Job. "My only hope is the world of the dead, where I will lie down to sleep in the dark. I will call the grave my father, and the worms that cut me I will call my mother and my sisters" (Job 17:13-14). There is no resurrection perception or ascension dimension, but only the cry for escape into the abyss of nothingness. And it is not just the leprosy or the cancerous lesions that are physically eating him away, choking off life. Nor is it the loss of his loved ones that has cast him into the depths of despair, nor the suspicion backed by observation and experience that the wicked are the ones who often seem to capture the "good life." It is rather the suspicion that God exists and yet ignores him and others like him. Perhaps God does not really care. Or as some process theologians speculate, perhaps it is that this so-called God is powerless to do anything about the pain.

Job's friends try to comfort him with words such as: "God has a purpose for all things. Don't question it, Job. The good are rewarded, the bad punished. Wealth and health are signs of God's favor. Sickness and economic failure are God's punishment. Get with it, Job. Pray for forgiveness and work yourself out of this hole." Job cries out: "I gave help to the orphans who had nowhere to turn ... I helped widows find security ... I was eyes for the blind, feet for the lame ... father to the poor" (Job 29:12-16). And his reward? "I am overcome with terror; my dignity is gone like a puff of smoke, and my prosperity like a cloud ... I call to you, O God, but you never answer; and when I pray, you pay no attention" (Job 30:15, 20).

let me try to get to the root of this thorn in the flesh of our scriptures, of this book of Job. I believe it penetrates to the heart of what it means to be human. What can we learn about life and God from these ancient poems of agony?

First, Job called out for God, even mocking God, not really expecting a reply. He cried into assumed emptiness. And then, and precisely then, God came to Job. A theophany. God spoke. God gave an answer that was not expected nor even liked. God's purpose moves on a level, a dimension that is beyond human comprehension. God does not, cannot lose touch. Divine intersections with one's life story often occur when least expected. The poem offers an Old Testament glance at God in the process of continuing creation.

The second message of Job is a rejection of the thesis that those who suffer loss or pain are probably being given what they deserve or what they are worth (the good are rewarded, the bad punished, all in health/wealth terms). The rejection of this mind set was a radical correction in the age of Job. It was an early insight into the aspect of divine will that was affirmed by the Jesus of today's gospel reading. His healing touch to the sick and possessed was offered simply because they were all sacred children of God, harmony offered not because of what they have done but because of who they were. They were not statistics of divine punishment, but sacred persons in need of physical and mental wholeness. In an age of international refugees, known starvation and the means to alleviate it, and with the imminent danger of a more substantial wedge being driven between the poor and the rich, Job's haunting cry in pain for accountability, all transposed on the image of Christ's healing will and word, needs to be heard anew.

Perhaps the most pertinent message from Job for us is centered in the realization that Job emerges from a time and a place similar to our own background. ~~The audience and the society that first read the Job story~~

~~was an upper middle class configuration during a relatively stable point of time when the accumulation of personal wealth and power was possible and in the process for many. Those that heard the poems first were sophisticated, talented, and well educated. They were the equivalent to most of you, who in the eyes of the surrounding world have it made. But that first audience was composed of people who were growing away from the concepts, definitions, and expressions of previous belief. They found it difficult to relate to earlier generations' expressions of faith and were even now portrayed by Job as being driven into a future of meaninglessness. Life built on self-sufficiency has the innate value of dust and ashes. You are called to speak the Word boldly to people in this exact situation.~~

The book Mars, written by Fritz Zorn,. The pseudonym "Zorn" in German sets the theme of anger. The protagonist is the child of affluent, modern parents. "We did nothing and said nothing and fought for nothing and had no opinions and spent our time being amused by other people who were ridiculous enough to do, say, or think something." He describes his life as colored by a pervasive sadness. Zorn talks about being taught "all the common Christian virtues" in a supposed Christian society. As a university student he wrote: "I grew up in the best and most intact and most harmonious and most sterile and most hypocritical of all worlds." Soon after leaving college he developed a tumor in his neck. He diagnosed it as an accumulation of "swallowed tears." The clinical diagnosis was "malignant" - that horror word of the twentieth century: a cancerous growth. Fritz Zorn takes the counsel of Job's friend to curse heaven and die. If God is the totality of reality, Zorn is only a cancerous cell to be sacrificed. "I am the carcinoma of God" wails Zorn. But his words of despair, like Job's cry, strike deep and carry a validity even without the physical disease.**The true malignancy is in the growing chasm, growth apparently out of control, between the individual and his or her sense of meaning and purpose.** Ultimate significance and permanence is found rooted only in a relationship with God. In today's society, there is no support system. n There is no longer a communal faith. When this nation was established, there was a faith in the nation as the city upon a hill. We had a mission to show the world what democracy and freedom were all about. We no longer have that support system. The Jews believed in a corporate personality. People seeing themselves as one. We not longer have the support of a common identity. We can't count on our government because of the infighting, we can't count on our families because of distance and divorce. We are a nation like the one to whom the book of Job was addressed.

Job questions: Is God able to be expressive in any meaningful way to a secular people for whom worship, the liturgy, the historic Church, and even the scriptures, seem to have been shifted to the fringes of priority? The answer to Job was that God is aware, does care, and does act.

The third section of Job is an editorial epilogue in prose that tries, with too much ease, to make things right. It misses the conclusion intended by the poetic theophany, and rather wishes to reward Job for his faithfulness with reinstated wealth and health. But that too-easy answer, and the whole book for that matter, holds ultimate meaning and hope only for the one who understands restoration in terms of resurrection.

More likely, one's answer to the problem presented by Job, in all honesty, will be a silent sense that we are in the hands of a loving God who ultimately will have things converge in reunion and peace. But that assurance does not or cannot have explicit power in the book of Job. It is only in an event when God put his seal on that hope in the form of his son. It is in the encounter with the crucified Christ, the suffering servant lifted on wings of resurrection, that the anxiety of Job is answered not by a distant Creator God, but by a creating God who is personal, positive, and permanent. ~~The fracture of Job is found in the Christ crucified and yet still held close as a part of God's promise.~~ Peace is in this no-separation.

In Christ we are called to identify with, and even participate in, the anxiety and pain of Job. We are also called at precisely this time to be bringers of justice and peacemakers. But face to face with Job, I can only respond to the pain and evil in God's good world with stumbling words out of my own faith

experience and the experience of others. I believe that God is true God and does not will evil to teach lessons, and that God weeps with us when that divine intention for life together in love and healthful, wholeness is distorted. Viewing life through the lens of the Christ, it is my belief that God identifies with the victims of life; and more, God wills to work through us to serve them. Love can always be born into the most negative, but that does not make the negative good or the negative God's will. Life often does not make sense, and yet the assurance is real that nothing, including evil, pain, and suffering, can separate us from the love of God. Nothing!

The readings are set up in a pattern of life. The first reading deals with suffering, the second with the relationship between faith and the gospel and finally the Gospel deals with a miracle by Jesus. It seems that we only look for God when we are suffering. And if we use the faith given to us by God and incorporate the Gospel into our lives then we can have a miracle.