

Children

Good morning, boys and girls. I want to talk with you today about talking with God. How many of you do that sometimes? (Let them respond.) All of us need to talk to God, as much as we can. We need to do it every day. Sometimes we do it here in church, don't we. Can you think of some times during worship when we talk to God? (Help them identify some times, including the prayers and the Lord's Prayer.) Do you have to use special words when you talk to God? No, you can use just ordinary words, just the way you talk to a good friend. In fact, God likes that kind of talking from us the very best of all. He likes it because it shows him that we really love and trust him and want to be his children and stay close to him.

What kinds of times should we talk to God? (Discuss it.) We don't want to talk to God only when we are in trouble, or only when we want a favor. You wouldn't talk to your best friend only when you wanted to get something, would you! Instead, we want to talk to God whenever we have something to share, even if it doesn't seem very important.

Do any of you have any special times when you talk to God? (Talk about this.) Sometimes we have trouble finding a good time in the day to stop and be quiet and talk to God. Here is a clock. You see how many minutes there are in an hour? There are sixty of them. It would be good to save a few minutes out of every hour to talk to God. And there are twenty-four hours in the day. That means there are 1440 minutes in a whole day. Of course, we are sleeping some of those minutes. But even if we just count the minutes we are awake, we have over 800 minutes every day. So it shouldn't be hard to find some minutes to use to talk to God, should it!

And yet, some people never find any time. Today's Bible story tells one way Jesus sometimes talked to God. He got up early, before the sun came up and went out in a lonely place to talk to God. Why do you suppose he did it that way? (Let them answer.) Right. Nobody could interrupt him then. That's a good way to talk to God, when it's quiet and we're alone. Don't forget to talk to God today.

Last Sunday the Church celebrated the Feast of St. John Bosco, or Don Bosco as he was called in his day in Italy. He lived in the north of Italy, in Turin, during the nineteenth century. This was a time of great turmoil. Up to that point, Italy was not a unified country, but a group of independent city-states and regions, or provinces governed by foreign powers such as Austria, Spain and France. During the nineteenth century, a great effort was made to cast off foreign rule and to unite the provinces into one country. A large and important part of Italy, including Rome, was governed by the Church and known as the Papal States. By 1870, the Vatican ceded all control of its territories to the united Italy, keeping only the one square mile now called the Vatican State. The desire to eliminate Vatican control led to a great deal of anti-clericalism. Added to this turmoil, a heretical group called the Waldensians were attacking Catholics in Northern Italy. Outside of Italy, there was turmoil throughout the world, including the American Civil War and revolutions in Latin America, all creating difficult situations for the Church. To many, the Church appeared to be in chaos.

This was the state of the Church that St. John Bosco served. God often communicated to Don Bosco through dreams. Don Bosco had a dream about the chaos of his times. This was his most important dream and also his best known dream. The dream contained a message that Don Bosco was told to relay to the Holy Father, Pope Pius IX.

In the dream Don Bosco saw a ship on the sea battling heavy waves and a fierce wind. It was a hurricane. Several times, the ship almost capsized, but its captain kept it afloat. As Don Bosco looked at the ship, he realized that the captain was Pius IX and the ship was the Church. Suddenly Don Bosco found himself on the ship. It was terrifying. Waves kept crashing over the ship. It could not hold out much longer. Soon it would break apart, or capsize, or simply sink. But off in the distance, Don Bosco could see a safe harbor and calm water. At the entrance to the harbor there were two huge pillars. To get to the harbor, the Pope had to negotiate the ship between these pillars. As the ship drew closer to the pillars, the Pope could make out something on top of each pillar. On one pillar there was the Blessed Sacrament. On the second pillar, there was the Mary, the Mother of God. St. John Bosco explained to the Pope that he can get the Church through the chaos and turmoil by emphasizing devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and Devotion to the Blessed Mother.

Don Bosco's advice was for more than the Holy Father. It was for all of us.

Like Job in the first reading, we all come upon times of chaos, times of stress. There are so many aspects to life for which there are no solutions. People have lost a loved one. Who has a solution to make the pain go away? Some members of our parish have chronically ill children. Parents are exhausted as their hearts are being torn to pieces. In some families, alcohol, drugs, psychological problems, or infidelity have broken up a marriage and a home. How can the family return to its state before it was devastated? It cannot. There is no solution. Chronic sickness and pain become the focus of a person's mind. How can he or she make believe it is not there? They cannot. Like Job we all experience what he called months of misery and nights of terror. Perhaps, we do not suffer to the extent that Job suffered, but life brings with it many challenges, including challenges to our faith that God will get us through the crisis.

The Lord is aware of our difficulties. He sees our turmoil. He wants to heal us, just as he healed all those people in the today's Gospel. He will help us pilot our ship through the chaos to the safe harbor. However, as in Don Bosco's dream, the Lord shows us that the way to the safe harbor is through our Devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and to the Virgin Mary.

We need the Lord's presence in the Eucharist. We need to feed on His flesh and drink His blood, as He tells us to do in the sixth chapter of *John*. We need the spiritual strength of the Eucharist to help us meet the challenges of life. We need to receive communion at least once a week. If we can, we should receive communion more often, daily if possible.

And we need to have a deep devotion to our Mother, the Blessed Virgin. She is, as Pope Francis calls her, the one who untangles knots. She cares for us with a mother's love and continually intercedes with her

son for us. She will not stop asking for help for her children. We say the rosary, and should say it daily, because we trust her to bring our needs to her Son.

In today's Gospel, Jesus comes upon Simon Peter's mother in law in bed with a terrible fever. She, like all of us, are important to the Lord. He has work for her. He reaches out to her, cures her, and she waits on the disciples. Then Jesus comes upon many people suffering the results of evil in our world, for all pain and suffering and death is due to mankind's original and continual turning away from the Lord of Life. He sees these poor people reaching out to Him, and He reaches out to them.

Today all of us are told that when we are suffering, in any manner whatsoever, we must trust in the presence of God. We believe that He is with us through all the turmoil. We believe that he cries out with us sharing our pain. He gives us the gift of the Eucharist and the gift of His Mother, to guide us from the chaos into the calm harbor.

Today we ask God, "When the difficulties of our human condition weigh heavily upon us, dear Lord and Divine Lover, help us pray."

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II

In this time of Covid, we all hope and pray that we avoid the virus that has killed to date more than 2,240,000 (million) people around the world, 441,000 in the US alone. As the virus mutates and infections again rise in the middle of our coldest months of winter, many are flocking to get the newly released vaccines. We feel an urgency to protect ourselves from the raging death toll and from even mildly infecting ourselves and others with an illness that seems to have no bounds as to the type of havoc it can wreak upon our bodies and minds both now and in years to come.

Still, despite our desire for change, for us, it can't come fast enough. Hospitals remain filled to the brim with patients, both ill and dying. Urgent care centers and testing centers continue to try to keep up with cases. We continue to wear masks and to socially distance, but we are growing weary. We are in urgent need of reprieve, and so our scientists and manufacturers continue to work feverishly in order to deliver the maximum amount of vaccines in record time, hoping to slow the spread and put a stop to the pandemic.

One of the hallmarks of the virus is a fever that persists, spiking off and on sometimes a month or more after the primary illness has passed. Like a ghost, it continues to haunt us, threatening to derail our lives.

We are as an entire world locked in a kind of long-term "fight and flight" response, immersed in a perpetual level of stress that we in our generation have never before experienced. And it's taking its toll on our psyches and our bodies.

We are tired. We are burnt out. We want a break from the relentless "fever pitch" we seem to be on.

How many of you now watch the news each and every day, obsessively looking for hope in the latest headlines? How many of you try to escape the realities of virus and loneliness in the solace of Netflix? How many of you are missing your children and grandchildren? How many of you are stress eating or have developed other forms of stress-related illness?

For some, the virus has ended budding relationships and challenged even the best marriages. It has caused some to lose loved ones without the ability to say goodbye. It has left others without resources, company, or the outlets that might keep them from depression, wellness, and financial security. We feel an urgency for this all to end. And yet an urgency to keep on fighting. Such is the human spirit.

Urgency scares us, it challenges us, and depletes us. But urgency can also be a good thing.

In our scriptures for today, we see Jesus near the beginning of his ministry on a "feverish" mission to spread the news of God's future plan for humanity throughout the entire region. With his newly called disciples by his side, he has embarked on a relentless journey through all of Galilee, "proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons." He would pause briefly in one place, and then while still in the early morning hours, he would again set out for the next destination.

This must have felt overwhelming for his disciples. They were used to a different kind of lifestyle, a more consistent lifestyle in which they would root their identity and existence in one place, creating families and a livelihood, social connections, and in some cases prestige. This itinerary of their rabbi Jesus to move from place to place every couple of days felt exhausting and pointless. Why wouldn't he just take the time to minister to the people already at hand?

This was the question they posed to him that morning as we read today. Jesus had gone off by himself to pray and refuel his spirit for the next part of the journey. His disciples however hunted him down, and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you!" They didn't understand why he couldn't just stay where he was with the people who already wanted to be with him and learn from him.

Jesus however replied: "Let's go on to the neighboring towns, so that I can proclaim the message there too, for that is what I came out to do." And so, the scripture tells us, he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons."

Jesus disciples wanted him to do what was expected, what was usual, what the people wanted, what they preferred. They wanted a break from the relentless traveling. They hoped Jesus would put down roots at least for a while and build up some momentum in the people he had already touched. But Jesus was determined to keep on walking.

Jesus' urgency comes from the same kind of passion, drive, and initiative that drives us onward in the face of a pandemic, even though we desperately want to stop and take a breath. Deep in his heart, Jesus must have been aware of the scant time he had in order to fulfill his mission, the vast numbers of people he would need to reach, the urgency of his message, and the vital importance of his salvation potential as messiah and Son.

In a sense, Jesus was the "vaccine" for his society's sin, and his mission had to proceed with an urgency his disciples had never before seen.

For God, the state of humankind had reached a "feverish state." Corruption was rampant. The faith had been corrupted. Thousands were cast out, had become lost, or were displaced. People were scared, oppressed, depressed, and hopeless. They needed hope. A Jesus kind of hope.

And yet despite the hope Jesus offered, the human penchant for familiarity, sameness, resistance of change became a constant challenge even for him. His own disciples failed again and again to understand the urgency of Jesus' message. They didn't truly believe, he only had three years to complete the ministry of a lifetime that would change the world. They couldn't imagine that his salvation message to the world would end in death. They didn't really believe that resurrection was real. They remained grounded in what they could see and hear, what they knew and understood, what made sense to them from within the framework that they knew.

Recognition, familiarity, is a powerful aphrodisiac.

But Jesus did go on. His disciples, loyal as they were, resistant as they sometimes could be, continued to follow him, as he urgently preached, taught, and healed throughout every region he could. And he did change the world.

His disciples learned from Jesus not just how to navigate life, but how to inaugurate a future. That despite feeling tired and longing for reprieve, they would need to push through and keep on walking.

Today, Jesus calls the church to do the same. He continues to offer us hope no matter how much sorrow we experience, and he continues to push us forward into mission and ministry when we would rather curl up with our popcorn and Netflix. For Jesus knows that now more than ever, there is an urgency to the gospel.

People need to hear it. People everywhere need to see Him. He needs to heal not just one community, but an entire world.

When we feel weary, we all would rather default to the familiar or as Jonah did, sit under a tree and wait for things to pass. But Jesus instead tells us, now more than ever, this is the time for mission. This is your chance to proclaim a hope and a different future.

Don't let the doldrums keep you from being the apostle Jesus designed you to be.

Don't let the familiar keep you from doing the spectacular.

ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., , by Lori Wagner

III

Welcome to this special liturgical holy day known as Super Bowl Sunday. No use fighting it. I know that some of you are focused almost completely on football today.

I heard about one young guy who is really in a difficult situation. He bought two tickets for today's Super Bowl far in advance. He forgot that he and his fiancé had scheduled their wedding for this same day and time. Now he realizes he can't go. It's out of the question. So, if you're interested and want to go instead of him, here's the relevant information: it's at St. Peter's Church in New York City at 5 p.m. Her name's Louise. She'll be the one wearing a white dress.

"Have you considered my servant Job?" God asked Satan in the heavenly court. This "blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" Well, Satan considered Job all right. But he only considered him a God-fearing man because he was being blessed. Remove all that blessing, Satan argued, and Job's piety will crumble and he will curse you. So the agreement is made between God and Satan; only Job's life must not be taken away. But everything else is of Job's is negotiable - family, servants, house, possessions. All of it. Job is then afflicted with sores covering his body, and he falls on the ground in lament.

"... the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

And the author of the book of Job comments, "In all this Job did not sin ..."

Whatever else this drama of Job is about, it is a tale of innocent suffering. Job is a righteous person, who fears God and who rejects evil. Yet within the scope of a couple dozen verses, we see Job transformed from the embodiment of Jewish blessing to the most tragic example of curse. Loss of family, wealth, and then even reputation come swiftly to Job. Yet he is innocent. God agrees, Satan agrees, and Job maintains his innocence throughout. The story is one of a good person suffering evil. And in this story Job represents all those who suffer as he does, innocent victims of evil. The innocent do suffer, and Job is not an exception: he is the symbol of all who suffer undeserved evil.

In one evening newscast you can sample the whole span of this innocent suffering. The lead story may be the Middle East again, with coverage of the casualties of the latest shelling. The religion is different, but we watch the same grief of families who have lost loved ones. It was just a matter of where the rockets fell. Even the wailing laments sound the same. It is the lament of Job. Later in the newscast, we look at an infant in need of a liver transplant. The jaundice is immediately apparent, confirming the life-or-death issue. Another innocent sufferer is joined in fellowship to brother Job. Finally, we see the coverage of an armed robbery. The brutal violence was "senseless," the reporter states, and three shoppers lie dead in a convenience store. Their loved ones join in the questions raised by Job: "Why has this happened? Why does God permit this evil to occur?" Every night it's like that. The innocent suffering. We read about it, we watch it live and in color, and it happens to us and our loved ones. The innocent joining with Job in a fellowship of suffering.

Almost as inevitable as the suffering of Job is what happens next. Job's friends come to him to interpret the meaning of his distress. "You have sinned," they announce, "and the sooner you repent, the sooner your fortunes will change." Job's friends are quite orthodox in their diagnosis of the suffering they see. All this "ill-fortune" is really curse, God's judgment for wrong-doing. Only some awful sin could result in such awful suffering. Therefore, Job is a sinner. His suffering gives him away. God is angry with him. The only other explanation would be that God is unjust, and that is unthinkable. "Does God pervert justice?" they ask. So they attack Job for his stiff-necked refusal to confess his guilt and admit his wrong. Their argument makes God into a cosmic computer, programmed to hand out retribution on a scale equal to the evil committed. Minor suffering equals minor guilt, and Job-level misfortune clearly points to God-only-knows what sort of sinfulness. But for Job's friends, the divine computer is also programmed for the elimination of such suffering. Admit your faults and there is a good chance things will take a quick turn for the better. And in response to Job's questioning as to why the universe works this way, his friendly advisers assure him that God's ways are beyond knowing. After spending days explaining to Job how the divine machine works and why he got caught in it, they piously report that God is a mystery. But for Job, this explanation is untrue. He has not sinned, and yet he suffers. He knows this, and we know it too.

Now what is odd here is that we hear the argument of Job's friends and we accept it. We don't particularly like the way their computer print-out reads, but we accept it as gospel truth anyway. So whenever suffering is encountered, it is a sure thing that God's wrath is being displayed right in front of us. But we're not so different than most everybody when it comes to this solidarity with Job's friends. It's rare when some other explanation of suffering is given! A mother looks down at her child lying sick in bed. The fever is high, cheeks are flushed ... there is some sort of infection. And in the midst of the other feelings at that moment, the mother bumps into a guilt problem. "If only I had done this ... or that ... then my baby wouldn't be in this condition." The mother has

accepted the thinking of Job's friends. The commuters on the train into the city glance out the window and look down at the ghetto passing by under the elevated. "Those idle people," some think, "if they weren't so lazy they would get themselves out of there." Job's friends ride the el every day, to work and back to the suburbs. Such misfortune as this poverty is admissible evidence that those people are guilty somehow.

We even apply the advice of Job's friends to ourselves. Some of us here have been through that eternity in the doctor's office, waiting for the tests to be done. We lie there on the hard examination bed and pass the time counting the number of holes in the ceiling tiles. Finally the doctor returns and we look up for some news. It's bad ... and we're going to need to take time off from work, lose weight, give up smoking. Have you noticed, in yourself or a friend, how this kind of crisis can eat away at a person's self-esteem? It is as if we only have value when we are capable of working. And if that worth is threatened by sickness, then we're not sure who we are, or if we are worth anything. Job's friends have just gained another companion. We are continually tempted to apply this "wisdom" to our own sufferings and to the sufferings of those around us. Innocent suffering becomes a contradiction in terms.

It is precisely in such a situation that we see Job at his lowest. That contradiction sits there with him on the ash heap. It entangles him. On one hand, he asks for vindication; rather, demands it of God.

Oh that I knew where I might find him,
that I may come even to his seat! -

Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power?

No he would give heed to me.

If Job could only get the Lord God subpoenaed into court, there would be acquittal for Job. More than anything, he wants vindication from his God.

But at the same time, Job is torn by the anger he feels towards his accusers and their "wisdom." He calls them "worthless physicians" and then levels a further insult: "Your maxims are proverbs of ashes ..." Job is in a fury because of the "prescriptions" of his friends. Yet at the same time he is counting on that wisdom to save him. Surely, if he can bring God to the tribunal, he can get the sentence dismissed and a "not guilty" ruling. Then he will be restored.

This self-contradiction that has caught Job is powerful and beguiling. We come across the pitfall again and again. It is one of the central struggles of human life. A poor family does not buy the maxim that their poverty is their fault, and so they work twice, three times, as hard as other people in order to disprove it. But no matter how hard they work, they drag the "wisdom" along with them.

Have you ever met someone who is blessed with a good measure of success in this life, but who seems driven to keep succeeding? It just may be that the person has been struggling for years to overcome some childhood events that still define who he or she is, afraid that if the world knew of the poverty or abuse of that child, that world would declare the adult "not worthy." Do you know someone caught in that trap? The "no-matter-how-hard-I-work-and-succeed, -it's-still-not-enough" trap. Are you, perhaps, caught in it yourself? Are we in that pitfall with brother Job...? And if we are, how in the world do we get out?

For Job, getting out of that trapnet involved an epiphany ... the appearance of the Almighty God. God comes before Job ... and the presence of the Lord and the word of the Lord are overpowering to this suffering soul.

Out of the whirlwind, God responds to Job:

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding."

Question after question challenges any claim Job might have to meet God as an equal - "Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades, or loose the chains of Orion?"

And, of course, Job must answer, "No." Only God is holy and has created all things. So Job confesses to God that he repents in dust and ashes. He repents, not of his claim to innocence, but of his presumptuousness. For he had sought to make God deal with him on the basis of some very human "wisdom." But note this! God now, at the end, still declares Job innocent. God has not asked Job to reject what he has known about himself. But as for Job's friends, they are declared guilty by God.

You have not spoken of me what is right,
as my servant Job has.

It is Job's friends who now must repent, for they were wrong. Their "wisdom" was foolishness.

So, Job is restored to health and prosperity. He is given twice as much as he had before. "And the Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning." Job heads off to a restoration meal with "all who had known him before." And his friends also head off, in a different direction, to offer sacrifice for their falsehoods about God. So, here on this old ash heap, it looks like only we are left.

Except, we don't have to stay here either. You see, what Job did not know was that God planned to appear in another way to the rest of us. There would be a different kind of epiphany. The holiness would be present, but many would miss it. In the fullness of time, God would appear, in our Job-like flesh, as a Servant. And the Servant would suffer and disclose the very pain of God: the Redeemer Job prayed for would come, and suffer, and die. And what Job didn't know, over there feasting with all his acquaintances, and what we do know, is that God has accepted that suffering on the Cross. It was for us. All our sufferings are couched within the suffering of the Lord. And we know that our Redeemer lives.

IV

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

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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. 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 Filipina 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.

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