1 Children

Boys and girls, do you like to tell people about Jesus? (Let them answer.) Some of you say yes and some of you say no. What are some good ways to do this? (Let them offer some answers if they care to.) Sometimes talking to other people about Jesus is not easy to do, is it? Why do you suppose that is?

One of the reasons I have found that people do not like to have you talk to them about God is that it seems too embarrassing to them. Or they may think it is none of our business. Or they may think that is personal and something they should not have to talk to anybody about.

What do you suppose would be some ways we could find to learn to talk about our vest friend, Jesus, when they don't seem to want to have us talk about him? (Let them offer some ideas.) What do yu think of this idea: first we need to learn to become a friend of the other person. And then we can share our good friend, Jesus with them. Do you think that would work?

It's a good idea to do it that way, because once you are a friend of mine, I will listen to you talk about things I would never have let you talk to me about before. Of course, to become somebody's good friend we need to learn what things are interesting to them. If the most important thing in their life is playing with electric trains, but we have never seen an elecric train, we probably will want to learn about trains. And maybe from the person whom we want to befriend. Or, if they are mostly interested in playing football - or basketball - or jacks - or dolls - we may need to get interetsed in the same thing first. Then we will have something to talk with this person about. And after a while we might be able to talk about our good friend, Jesus. If we have become another person's friend, they will become interested in our friends too.

Now for the hard part. What if the person is interested in something you really don't like at all? Take a look at this (show them the record). This is a rock-and-roll record. I just really don't like this kind of music. But what if I become a friend of somebody who loves rock-and-roll music? What should I do? (Let them tell you.) Right. I may have to learn to listen to some of this music, just enough to understand what it is about. Then maybe my friend will listen to me and what is important to me.

Adult

As I look back on the 20th century there are milestone events: WWII in the 40s, man landing on the moon in the late 60s, and the advent of the computer in the 80s. There are world dominating brands: Coke, Ford, and Microsoft. And, what about the people? I don’t mean our individual memories but as a culture. Who stands out? I think there are only 3 people who transcend their time on this earth and have become icons beyond the 20th century. Monroe, Elvis and Ali. Muhammed Ali was the unprecedented three-time world heavyweight boxing champion. His picture appeared on the cover of magazines and Newspaper for two decades. Probably more press than any other athlete at that time. At the height of his popularity, none could touch him in our out of the ring. You remember his mantra: float like a butterfly and sting like a bee." Everywhere he went reporters, trainers and his staff followed him. But that was the glory years. What happened to Muhammed Ali in his senior years? There was a reporter by the name of Gary Smith, a sportswriter, who went to find out the answer to that question.

As they were visiting, Ali showed the sportswriter the barn next to his farmhouse. In the barn, on the floor leaning against the walls, were pictures and framed newspaper articles from his prime. It was strange that they were in a barn but maybe, there were just too many and spilled over into the storage of the barn. Photos of the champ punching and dancing, shadow boxing. There was a picture of Ali holding his championship belt high in triumph from the world-famous fight dubbed: "The thrilla in Manilla."

As the camera cut to the pictures, you couldn't help but notice they were covered with white streaks. The white streaks were bird droppings. Just then the ex-champ looked into the rafters at the pigeons who made his gym their home. Then perhaps as a statement of despair, Ali walked over to the row of pictures and one by one turned them over. Then he walked to the door and stared out at the countryside. He mumbled something so low the sportswriter asked him what he said. "I had the world," Muhammed Ali repeated, "and it wasn't nothin'. Look now." (1)

What would it take to make you happy? Wealth? Fame? Popularity? More times than not, the teachings of Jesus run counter to the messages the world gives us about happiness. But Jesus' teachings were consistent with his life. From the beginning of his ministry crowds surrounded him everywhere he went. His disciples thought it was great. They couldn't understand why Jesus didn't share their excitement. According to worldly standards Jesus was a smashing success, an overnight sensation, a hit, their champion. The disciples were trapped into thinking that more was better. They thought this was what Jesus wanted. There were times they didn't understand Jesus at all. If wealth and fame and acceptance don't bring happiness, where are they to be found?

HAPPINESS BEGINS WITH A TOUCH.

Jesus was visiting in the home of Simon Peter. Simon's mother-in-law was sick in bed with a high fever. Without anyone saying a word about her illness Jesus went over to her, touched her, and lifted her up. Immediately she was healed. Notice that Jesus never said a word; he just touched her. We are not told how long she was sick in bed, or her condition. All we are told is that Jesus touched her and made her well. It was a miracle. Notice what happened next. Immediately she got up and began serving Jesus and his disciples. Having been sick in bed she must have been weak, but when Jesus touched her she felt a strength she had never felt before. She got up out of bed and began serving him. This was her way of saying thanks. But it began with a touch.

This is a point that must be made. Happiness is not simply an option we exercise. People who buy self-help books on how to be happy are going to be disappointed. Happiness begins with a touch, a touch of the Master's hand.

W. E. Sangster was once asked if he would find time to cheer up a young man who was recuperating from a nervous breakdown. Sangster promised to do his best. He sought the young man out and began to try to help him, but it was hard work. "This is a gray world," the young man said. "I see no purpose in it. It is dull, meaningless and evil. Its pleasures soon pass. Its pains endure. I seriously ask myself the question: `Is life worth living?'

Sangster saw him once or twice a week for nearly two months. Every conversation was the same nothing seemed to improve. Then something happened to that young man. He fell in love. Head over heels in love! On the day his engagement was announced he came to see Sangster and began the conversation with these words: "This is a lovely world. Come out into the garden and listen to that little bird singing, fit to burst its heart. Isn't it a glorious morning? How good it is to be alive!"

That young man did not will himself to that change of attitude. It was not a choice he made. Something happened to him within. He fell in love. He was touched. So it is when we experience Christ's presence in our lives. The world seems to change. But it isn't the world at all. We are changed by a touch.

HAPPINESS ALSO COMES WHEN WE DISCOVER THE POWER OF PRAYER.

An unwritten motto of our culture here in the 21st century is that the busier we are, the happier we are. So, we strive to be busy. It's a mistake. Consider Jesus' approach.

By nightfall, word had spread throughout the town that Jesus was there and that he had the power to heal people. By dusk Mark says the whole city was at Simon's door looking for Jesus. They brought their sick, "with various diseases," hoping that he would be able to heal them. The disciples had never seen such a crowd. With all those people Jesus must have been exhausted. It was probably late when they all left. Yet early the next morning, before anyone in the house woke up, Jesus left in search of a lonely place, a place where the crowds would be unable to find him, so he could be alone to pray. Jesus, who had given so much of himself to others, needed some time alone with the Father. He who had given so much; needed some time to receive.

That's also true of us. Some people are so superficial when it comes to their understanding of prayer. "Hey, Father," said a man talking to a priest. "You got it all wrong about this God stuff. He doesn't exist. I oughta know."

"Why's that, my son?" asked the priest.

"Well," the man said, "when I was ice-fishing in the Arctic far from the nearest village, a blizzard blew up with wind and blinding snow. I was a goner. So, I got down on my knees and prayed really hard, begging God for help."

"And did He help you?" asked the priest.

"Heck no," said the man. "God didn't lift a finger. Some Eskimo appeared out of nowhere and showed me the way."

Prayer is a potent force in the life of the believer. It is so potent that some followers of Christ have devoted their lives to nothing else.

In Colorado there is a Benedictine abbey which is home to forty-five monks. One day a reporter stopped to have lunch with the monks and to ask them some questions. He asked them why they lived as they did. Brother William, seventy-years-old explained, "You have to understand, everything we do is a form of prayer." Noticing the puzzled expression on the reporter's face he added, "It's hard for some people to comprehend that. Prayer is not just reciting prayers, it is always talking with God whenever you are alone."

"Then why confine your life to the abbey?" the reporter asked. "Wouldn't you accomplish more by reaching out to people?"

Several of the monks cleared their throats when they heard that question, "Accomplish more? No," Brother William responded. "We do reach out. You can't love God unless you reach out. If I existed the way I should exist” don't get me wrong, I don't ” but if I existed the way I should, then people would be moved to ask more, to see my life as an example." And Brother William added, "In that sense, I am reaching out."

With a genuine sadness Brother William informed the reporter that the beautiful abbey is experiencing financial difficulties. They have had to rent out some of their buildings, and put the rest up for sale. "That is sad," the old monk said, "the intense interest in learning to be a monk isn't there anymore." Many people, he explained, were taking shortcuts in their lives. "We are here as examples," he said, "to show that there aren't any shortcuts. There are only the long paths, the commitments. That's what we do here," he added. "We are an example for people like you." (2) Happiness is experiencing the Master's touch. Happiness is spending time in prayer.

FINALLY, HAPPINESS IS GETTING OUR PRIORITIES IN ORDER.

We need to take inventory of our lives to determine what's important and what is not. Certainly Jesus did.

That next morning when Simon and the other disciples awoke, they discovered that Jesus was nowhere to be found. Perhaps they panicked a bit. They actively searched until they chased him down. They interrupted his prayer time. "Everyone is searching for you," Simon tells him. To this Jesus answers, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." Jesus would not be side-tracked by the adulation of the crowds. He knew where he was headed. Nothing else mattered.

Gorman Williams spent most of his life as a missionary to India. He purchased tickets for a long-awaited vacation back to the United States. He had counted down the months and days until he would be home. A few days before he was to leave he heard about some Jews who had escaped the wrath of the Nazis. They had traveled by boat to India seeking refuge. Since it was a time of global war, the Indian government denied their request to immigrate. They were granted permission to stay for a short time in the lofts of the buildings near the dock. Their living conditions were wretched. But it was better than being sent to a concentration camp in Germany.

It was Christmas Eve when Gorman Williams heard about the plight of these Jews. Immediately he went to the dock, entered the first building and called out, "Merry Christmas! What would you like for Christmas?" The response was slow. "We're Jewish," someone called out. "I know," Williams said, "but what would you like for Christmas?" The weary Jews, fearful for their very lives, replied, "We would like some German pastries."

At that point Gorman Williams sold his ticket to the United States and purchased more German pastries than anyone had ever seen. He bought a huge variety and carried them in large baskets.

Later he told this story to a group of students. One brash, judgmental young man reprimanded him. "You shouldn't have done that," he said, "they were not even Christians." "No they weren't," the wise missionary quietly replied, "but I am." (3) Gorman Williams had his priorities in order.

What would it take to make you happy? Every study I have seen on the subject indicates that people who are actively engaged in serving God are far happier than the general population. That does not surprise me. Happiness is the touch of the Master's hand. Happiness is discovering the power of prayer. Happiness is having your priorities in order.

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2. Jim Lilliefors, HIGHWAY 50: AIN'T THAT AMERICA. (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1993), pp. 169-173.

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King Duncan

2

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.

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I

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."

*This material is used with permission of its author, Rev. Msgr. Joseph A. Pellegrino, Diocese of St. Petersburg, FL*

3

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

4

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 hiniself. 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.

5

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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.

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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?

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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.

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