

4 October, 2009; Proper 22b
Job 1:1, 6-11, 20-21, 2:3-10; Ps 26
Heb 1:1-4, 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16

Rev. Deborah Meister

This has been a hard week in the lives of those I love. Thursday, October 1st, was the anniversary of the death of my friends' son Jacob, who was born with a defective heart, and died in surgery at the age of 21 months. Always, on October 1st, his parents stay home from work, taking time to be together, to do the things Jacob used to love. They are deeply faithful people, people who strongly sense that Jacob is still with them in some way they cannot understand. Still, the day is always hard. And then, yesterday morning, as I was sitting down to write this sermon, I received word of another dead son, a man in his early twenties who was killed while going about his daily routine on a ranch. For both these families, the calendar will forever be marked with an empty space -- the day of loss -- and their lives marked with the iron pen of might-have-been.

And they are not alone. This week has seen wide-scale suffering in many parts of the world -- in too many places: Samoa. American Samoa. The Philippines. Indonesia. And in those places where war has become the new normal, peace a mirage which always recedes when you approach it. Rachel weeps for her children in Baghdad, in Afghanistan, in the corners of our cities. Realities like this put paid to any facile statements such as "God's in his heaven, all's right with the world." (Robert Browning) God is in heaven, but the world is not there with him. Yet.

Today's Scriptures take us on an intimate walk through a landscape devastated by grief and by loss: loss of things, loss of relationships, loss of family, loss of life. And, between them, Jesus, "the pioneer of [our] salvation... [who was] made perfect through sufferings." (Heb 2:10) This is no sparkly cartoon world painted in Technicolor by faith; rather, it is in the world we live in, here, today, the very world in which we are called to witness to the sustaining presence of God. The same world which causes some of our friends to say that there can be no God, or that, even if there is, they are not willing to worship a God who permits there to be such pain.

I do not have an answer to their anguished questions, only respect for the compassion which prompts them. There are no answers to such questions. Even within Scripture itself, the Book of Job rebukes our search for facile answers, our craving to have a world which coheres in terms that we, ourselves, can understand. We are not, Job's God answers, the measure of all things.

Indeed, the Book of Job makes it seem that we may be merely toys tossed about at the whim of the Almighty. The book begins with a council in heaven, in which "the heavenly beings" came to present themselves before God, and, with them, Satan, the adversary, the antagonist and accuser of humankind. And God calls their attention to Job, the outstanding man of his generation, noting that he is perfect in his ways, "blameless and upright" before the Lord (Job 1:1,8) But Satan asks, "Does Job fear God for nothing?", for Job is a very wealthy man. (Job 1:9) He enjoys houses and children, great herds of livestock and quantities of gold -- all the trappings of what we usually consider the good life. And so God gives Satan the power to take them away, and in one dread day Job loses all that he has, animals and sons and daughters together. And he sits in the dust and says, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed by the name of the Lord." (Job 1:21) And again Satan comes before the Lord, and the Lord calls his attention to Job's continuing faithfulness. But Satan replies, "Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." (Job 2:4-5) And so Satan afflicts him with "loathsome sores" all over his body, until even his wife urges him to die, but Job remains steadfast: "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God and not receive the bad?" (Job 2:10)

It is an unsettling passage. It raises every kind of question about the goodness of God, about why God would permit such horror. If we are moral people, if we are ethical, we can only be

revolted, even though it is a parable and not an historical account. And then along come Job's friends, trying to explain it. Over and over, for the next thirty-three chapters, they trot out platitude after platitude, each one a failed attempt to explain the mystery of suffering. *It's your fault*, they tell Job. *You must have done something wrong. You are a sinner. God must be very angry with you.* For page after page, they list every whisper that troubles our heart in the night when we seek to understand why something terrible has happened. It seems to be a perverse human instinct. The abused child assumes she deserves it. The bereaved parent searches his memory, going over and over the hard ground of his life, trying to see what he did to deserve this, what he could have done differently. The cancer patient seeks a reason. No reason appears. Our very being cries out that, if we could only understand the *why* of this pain, we would somehow be able to endure it. Understanding a situation is, after all, a way to begin to recover our control of it, but sometimes no understanding is possible.

Out of that void, Job speaks. He refuses his wife's incitement to curse God, but he well and truly curses just about everything else. "God damn the day I was born and the night that forced me from the womb. On that day -- let there be darkness; let it never have been created; let it sink back into the void....Why couldn't I have died as they pulled me out of the dark? Why were there knees to hold me, breasts to keep me alive? If only I had strangled or drowned on my way to the bitter light....I sit and gnaw on my grief; my groans pour out like water. My worst fears have happened; my nightmares have come to life. Silence and peace have abandoned me, and anguish camps in my heart."¹ (Job 3:3-6, 11-12, 24-26, translated Stephen Mitchell, *The Book of Job*) Job wails and he laments, but he does not try to explain what has happened. He will not admit that he has done anything bad enough to have brought on this tide of woe; he knows he has not. He does not try to frame the world in terms that he can understand, for this would reduce the magnitude of sorrow to something that can be held in the human mind. He resists every simplistic answer, and demands to see the face of God himself.

And here is the mystery: *God answers*. God does not answer the friends, the ones who think they understand the ways of God. Indeed, God is angry with them, castigates them for speaking things about God which are not right. But God does answer Job. The faithfulness of Job is manifested when he sits in the pain of his own reality and refuses to pretend that things are other than they are. He holds up the awfulness of his broken humanity, and he calls on the power of God, refusing to let go of the twin arms of his cross. That is all.

Sia Figiel wrote in this week's *New York Times* of her experiences the day of the tsunami in American Samoa. She woke in the earthquake, drove her children to school, and then heard, on the radio, the warnings that a tsunami was coming. She turned the car around and headed back, only to learn that the children had been evacuated to the highest point on the grounds of the school. And then, she says, on the way there she heard hymns coming down the road to meet her. The children had begun to sing and to pray. She found her sons and they sat there together and waited for the wave to break, listening as the radio stations winked out, one by one, until only the Christian station was left. As their world drowned, they listened to prayer.²

There are times when that is all that we, the people of God, can do. When marriages fall apart, when families are scattered, when jobs vanish and war rages and there are no words to express the sorrow that we feel, still we can hold one another in our hearts and cry out to the Lord, as Job cried out. It seems like a small thing, but God works through small things. It is a form of faithfulness. It is, perhaps, *the* form of faithfulness: to reach for the hem of the garment of a receding God and to refuse to allow the distance to grow. It is the very action of Christ on the cross, crying out with his fading breath, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" For the

¹ Job 3:3-6, 11-12, 24-26, translated Stephen Mitchell, *The Book of Job*.

² Sia Figiel, "The Day of the Tsunami," *NYT*, September 30, 2009.

faithfulness of Christ *is* the faithfulness of Job: to take into himself the pain of the world, to hold within himself the power of God, and to refuse to let go of either, until, in his very body, he becomes a bridge reconnecting heaven to earth and earth to heaven.

Because Christ has done it first, so can we. We can shed “the hardness of our hearts” and choose to live without armor. The world is not yet entirely in subjection to God (our losses are witness to that), but already “we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.” (Heb 2:9) By tasting death for everyone, by the mysterious power of compassion, which means “suffering along with others”, Christ gained glory and honor -- and so can we.

Satan has no understanding of this form of honor. When he causes terrible things to fall upon Job, he assumes that the loss of Job’s children will not trouble him nearly so much as a skin disease -- even though I do not know any parent who would not willingly sacrifice a limb to save his or her child. Satan simply cannot fathom a way of living in which other people mean as much to us as our own interests, or even more. And yet that very re-orienting of ourselves toward one another is the nature and ground of the compassion of God.

Scripture does not tell us why terrible things happen, but it does urge on us a particular form of response. When Christ calls us brothers and sisters, when he refers to us as children, what is he doing but reconstituting us as a family of sorts, one not determined by age or gender, but by a common love of this mysterious God we have come to know. We may break our relationships -- we sometimes do, after all -- but that breakage does not have to be the end. We may fail one another, but God will not fail us. Whatever broken relationships we have, whatever our loss, whatever our grief, still we can come to God like little children, and God will welcome us. All of us, with all we bring. “Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, ...Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters.” (Heb 2:18, 11) We lay our baggage at the foot of the cross-- all the ways we have learned distrust, fear, and suspicion of one another, and not least of ourselves -- and we find that there are other people there, with their own wounds, and we begin to learn again how to welcome one another. For with God, ruin does not have the final word.

Until then, we pray for mercy, and for one another. Amen.