

## The Frustration of Powerlessness

Job 23:1-9, 16-17 (below courtesy of Vanderbilt Divinity Library)

Ps. 22:1-15

Hebrew 4:12-16

Mark 10:17-31

23:1 Then Job answered:

23:2 "Today also my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy despite my groaning.

23:3 Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling!

23:4 I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments.

23:5 I would learn what he would answer me, and understand what he would say to me.

23:6 Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; but he would give heed to me.

23:7 There an upright person could reason with him, and I should be acquitted forever by my judge.

23:8 "If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him;

23:9 on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.

23:16 God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me;

23:17 If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!

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Here we have the second of the four Job lectionary texts. I skipped last week's because of illness and World Communion Sunday. Job is the first of the so-called Poetical, or Wisdom, group of the Old Testament books and focuses on the problem of human suffering. It doesn't really answer any questions but it probes the various aspects of human suffering in such a thorough way that one comes to the end with a sense of greater understanding, even if there are no wholly true answers given.

The story goes that Job was considered to be a great man of faith and wealth and for whatever reason; Satan is allowed by God to put Job to the test. Job suffers tremendous personal and physical losses and the whole Book consists of various conversations trying to analyze why this could happen and he hears nothing from God until the very end.

In today's scriptures Job is going through a phase that I wouldn't be surprised if we all haven't experienced before. We talk, we pray, we think, we strive, we read we do everything we can to come to some sense of understanding why God would allow evil to happen to us, and we hear no response, feel no sense of resolution. If only we could find God - talk to God, and then we could lay our case out and know that God would respond, but God is not to be found. We are powerless at these points and there is nothing more frustrating than facing injustice and having no recourse. The frustration, the aggravation, the desolation, misery, and anguish of not being able to connect with the God we live for.

I doubt very much that anyone needs any more examples of the periodic confusion in our lives, when we are just stuck dumb with confusion about faith. We all have had them in our personal lives, when we didn't understand why God treated us a certain way - or why shocking things happen to innocent people. This phenomenon, of the rain falling on the good and the evil alike, is an ancient human theme. We have it in Job; we have it in a variety of mythological tales. It is apparent that life is not like a recipe, that if you follow religious rules exactly you will avoid having a failed experience. Painful and horrible things happen to all humans.

How we get through the pain is the focus of millions of different human endeavors. Some turn to additives in their lives like alcohol or drugs - legal and illegal. Some avoid pain by focusing on other hobbies, or sports, or work, or love. How we all deal with the disappointments and pain determine much of who we are.

And how involved we are in a conversation with God about life and death doesn't protect us from experiencing loss. So if having our wishes come true about our time on this earth is not the goal of a religious life - what is it then? Because so often that is what we have come to believe - that if we are really wise and really good, we should have

control over what our lives become. If only we make good grades in school and be involved in church and not break any commandments our lives will become all we want out of it.

We don't need any more examples, Job is just fine, as well as the innocent people of faith who have suffered, including our own losses, but I will share with you one example more. When I think of Job, I think of Margret Krebs. She was about 5 years older than I and when we first came to Frankfurt (Oder) in 1996 she was working in the church PR department. She was an amazingly efficient person and a person of good faith. She designed and sewed her own clothes, and was always immaculately groomed. She lived alone which meant she had lots of time to help care for her nephews and nieces, and lots of volunteerism for the church and the various other Christian groups in the town. And when it came time to share personal wishes, she would almost always pray that she would meet a man and marry and have children of her own. And she expressed so often her lack of understanding why God didn't answer her prayer.

She got a nerve disease which caused an amazing amount of pain and slowly died, ending her days in a nursing home. She had *a lot* of love and support from all those who came in contact with her over the years and through all her efforts for others.

But I don't believe I was alone in wondering why her life never was as she had hoped, and why she had to suffer the way she did at the end. We all knew that in the end she was beloved and held and cared for by a merciful God to whom she had dedicated her earthly days. She is free now of all wondering, and the question of "Where is God?" is no longer torturing her.

Because I think that was what concerns us the most at times like these mentioned by Job. It is almost like we can take all the suffering, if only we knew where we could take our complaints - if only we knew that there was something we could do - somewhere we could go and know that our thoughts are being shared somewhere where it would make a difference.

When something happens we want to call the right department to have it taken care of. Humans seem to *need* to have access to something constructive or we fear we will go slightly insane.

Sometimes we do know where God is and we do understand that if we just hang in there long enough all will be revealed. Sometimes just hanging on to the idea of faith and the memory of those times when we knew is the best we can ask for.

And I believe that these moments where we want to register a complaint and can't find the right place exemplifies what faith is all about. Those are the moments when we need to turn to *each other* and realize that the purpose of faith is to help us come to realize that *we are* all together in this unjust life. Life *is* unfair - if the purpose to living is that nothing bad ever happens to us.

If we believe and try to follow the scriptures and go to church only because we want the rewards of the game of life it is in reality a rather selfish reason. And faith is not a competition where those who have the best faith win a life free of pain. Life is the great grace equalizer and faith is about loving each other not judging each other. Love isn't love if it is something we do for others - but love is the mutual experience of our humanity together.

That is why the concept of Jesus Christ is so amazing. God wanted to show us that he isn't a force above us looking down and we need to live in fear - so he send his son - he sent the most intimate part of God's-self and Jesus suffered with us.

Jesus wouldn't let anyone play the "I'm a winner you are the loser in religiosity" game. When the adulterous was to be stoned, he stopped it saying, "Those who are without sin cast the first stone." When he was being tortured and murdered, he didn't stop it; because the point of faith is not for personal gain but to bring us closer to each other and therefore closer to God.

Our Gospel for today points this out as well. Someone wants to know how to win the ultimate faith prize - eternal life. This young wealthy man is quite sure that he has done everything he needed to do to be good enough, until Jesus suggests that he might give up all his wealth - wealth being the ultimate in separating humanity from each other. Jesus seemed to notice that this competitive way of thinking was the sin this young man suffered from. He wanted to know how to win the game of faith, and Jesus knew all too well that the goal of faith is not to win wealth

or eternal life - but to live in the moment with each other - to be the place of faith where others go to when they are searching for God. That frustration of being powerless is lessened when we share the pain together - when we realize that life isn't always fair in the moment but with time we *can* glean great things out of suffering together.

The sense of loss when we cannot find God is lessened when the man we believe as son of God - and God incarnate - and giver of the Holy Spirit - also suffered unfairly. Our image of him on the cross is where we can always find him, and we hold on through those dark moments because we know that the resurrection lay somewhere ahead for us. And we can always find God in each other when we come here and share. Amen