

Homily for the 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 6-7, 2021

Readings: Job 7: 1-4, 6-7; 1 Corinthians 9: 16-19, 22-23; Mark 1: 29-39

Preacher: Sr. Karen Dietz

The Book of Job is really a theological treatise of sorts, attempting to make the mystery of suffering more understandable. That is what we are presented with in today's reading from the Hebrew scriptures. Tragedy upon tragedy is heaped on Job and he leans into despair. I write this on the Feast of the Presentation when we celebrate the light of faith and the light of Christ. The contrast seems wide. But is it really?

Yesterday I learned of the deaths of two parishioners. This is not unusual as we are an older parish with many funerals from week to week. What moved me to tears was the stories of these two losses. The first was an elderly woman who follows her beloved husband to the heavenly kingdom by only three months. Her death was sudden, and she leaves her children and grandchildren lost and confused. The second was a woman just a few years older than me. She was experiencing a recurrence of cancer—a diagnosis she received the same week her young adult son died, just a short seven months ago. This family has experienced two other tragedies in recent years and her husband and surviving children, and young grandchildren are shocked and wondering where God is.

We are in the beginning of the 12th month of the pandemic and we continue to experience racial unrest and political posturing (to the detriment of the poor and many others). This has been and continues to be a time of communal suffering as well as much individual grief and loss. As I paint this picture, it seems dark and almost hopeless, and yet, as a Christian I know there is the light of resurrection and life.

The Gospel for today gives me some insight into where to find this light. Jesus continues to be very busy healing the sick, casting out demons and spreading the Good News of faith. He seems almost assaulted by those in need. He is immersed in a world of sickness and anguish. However, Jesus takes the time to step away by himself, even for a little while. Jesus needed to breathe, to regroup and to pray seeking comfort for his own broken heart.

Isn't this what happens to us? We can become overwhelmed by the anxieties and stresses of our lives to the point of losing perspective. In our effort to be compassionate and empathetic, we take on the pain and sorrow of others to the point of struggling to draw breath. It feels like I have existed in this space of suffering for a long time. These weeks and months of anxiety can take a toll. I forget to take a moment to myself to sit quietly inside or outside and offer my concerns to a God who I know will take them into God's own heart.

The psalm for today helps me get in touch with what might happen in a time away. Psalm 147 speaks of a God who heals the brokenhearted, binds wounds, rebuilds, and sustains the suffering. This is a God who does not prevent hard things from happening, but carries those who are struggling, leading them to the light. Jesus must have felt overwhelmed by the cares of all those being brought to him. They were crowding him, pressing him to bring healing and comfort. I believe he was thrown into a space of anxiety and despair – that is what caused him to awake early that morning, before anyone else. That is what moved him to step away by himself for prayer.

As I minister to the families suffering such devastating losses or watch the evening news or ruminate on things, I realize I need to step away even for a little while. I need to do this for my own heart, which aches for those needs and areas of discord in our world. I might need to rise early before anyone else so that I might present these concerns to God, confident that God will take them to heart and bring healing, sustenance, and courage.

Job trusted in God, even as he experienced doubts. He continued the conversation with God, sometimes blaming and complaining, but conversing, nonetheless. Jesus also continued the conversation, even when it seemed impossible to do so. This is the hope we cling to; this is the light we seek. And we look for it because as people of faith, we know it must be there.

Soon we will enter the Lenten season. Today's readings prepare us to dive into the season with a whole heart confident that God will heal that heart even when the brokenness seems too great to bear. The promise of faith does not take away the suffering, rather it offers a salve to soothe and heal. It offers a light that shines and illumines the darkest places. I pray that light grows strong for us all.