

Why?

Today's lesson from Job comes at nearly the end of what is perhaps one of the most profound books of the whole Bible, a book that dwells on perhaps the most profound question ever to face human beings:

Why is there suffering; and more to the point, why do good people suffer?

It is the question that haunts humanity.

Whether the question is one of a 5 year old with leukemia or the unspeakable madness of the holocaust or the rampages of tornados and earthquakes; humanity looks to the sky and asks the omniscient, omnipresent God: WHY?!

The Book of Job is devoted to that question.

And as it unfolds, the answers that come at first are answers that we have all heard, and shook our heads at in weary resignation.

Job's friends gather to commiserate with him.

One is sure Job did some secret wrong and is being punished.

Today, we call that lie Karma: you get what you deserve.

Except human experience says that's really not true: and we needn't look far for examples.....examples I shall leave to your own experience.....because we all know those who seem to be rotten to the core yet thrive in money, power and prestige.

Other of his friends suggest the suffering is for a greater good; and while those who have known deep suffering will often attest to the wisdom that eventually grows in the hollow places caused by deep suffering; it is an explanation that fails to satisfy; since surely there must be other paths to wisdom that don't include the death or debilitating illness or lostness of loved ones.

These are the central questions of humankind and while the Book of Job's long meditation on these questions answers them as a ballerina may speak to a clam: "You can't know because you simply can't know", it is the life and death and resurrection of Jesus that finally does begin to give us a glimpse, the merest peak, behind the curtain that is the mystery of human suffering.

In Jesus, God fully and unconditionally – to the point of accepting torture and humiliating and excruciating death – death on a cross – God fully and unconditionally takes his place with us in this world of suffering – and taking us by the hand and never letting us go, leads us into a Way in which surrender and loss and giving up and letting go become entry ways into the mystery of all that is: the mystery we call God.

Today's story of the tossed boat is just one of the so many experiences Jesus has with his friends to show them that even in the midst of darkest dangers, when all seems hopelessly lost and forever doomed; even in the midst of all of that; God is with us; and because God is with us; as God revealed to Blessed Julian of Norwich: "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."

We can't go it alone.

We need each other for this journey; and that's why the first thing Jesus did was to gather a group of disciples.

We need each other, especially when suffering comes calling.

But we need each other as church; as followers of Jesus.

One minister puts it this way:

"Unlike a bowling league or the Coalition to Save Historic Buildings, the church is not a group of like minded people who, on their own initiative, rally around a common desire or a worthy cause. The church rather, is a peculiar people, called by God and sent out onto a dangerous sea. Were it not for the command of Christ, no one would voluntarily climb into this boat." T. Long, Matthew, 166.

Victor Frankel survived the horrors of the Nazi death camps.

He said: "The world is in a bad state, but everything will become still worse unless we each of us does his or her best."

How do we do our best?

Have you heard of the desert fathers and mothers?

They were, in the very early Church, 300--400 AD, monks who went into the desert to face themselves.

Their saying was: "Pay attention to yourself."

NOT, "Be yourself," which is some of the worst advice ever given to anyone.

Instead, "pay attention to yourself."

You see, what the desert fathers and mothers came to see, as they paid attention to themselves, is that we are all sinners.

We are all broken somewhere, somehow.

It's one reason I encourage all of our members to come to receive holy communion precisely because holy communion isn't a reward for saints, it's a meal for sinners.

As those desert fathers and mothers come to a deeper and deeper understanding of this truth, what they learn is this: they learn compassion.

For when we really take time to see ourselves, myself, as I really am, the good, the bad, and all the rest, it starts to get very hard to judge the gal sitting next to me.

And while many in the early church readily accept the admonitions not to kill or steal or commit adultery, the hardest of all of Jesus'

commands, then and now, is his command that we not judge one another.

That's the hardest of all.

Judgment comes most quickly when I believe in my innermost self that God is far away, since then, it is I who must ride to the rescue.

Remembering that God is God is the cure.

And God is never far away.

God is always the God who is near.

It is Eckhart who reminds us that "God is never far away, and if he cannot come under your roof, still he is no farther than your porch, where he stands, and waits."

When we distance God from the world we live in, we turn God into an idol, and we leave the world to rot in its sin.

When we give in to the temptation to value our church buildings over extending hands in friendship and love to the very least among us, we miss the mark.

God is God of life; ALL of life, every day of life; even when we are at our best, and perhaps especially when we are at our very worst.

God is always near.

And perhaps, at the end of the day, coming to experience the nearness of God, even as the harshest storms blow, is all that really matters.

+amen