

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B
June 23, 2024

We get a real contrast in our readings today. The contrast between our first reading from Job and our Gospel reading is extreme, in fact. The Church pairs these readings, however, because they both say something about evil and suffering.

And let's face it; evil and undeserved suffering, in particular, are a problem. Evil and undeserved suffering threaten our confidence in God. And – truth be told – there's no fully satisfactory way to square the circle with respect to the following three statements. One, God is all powerful. Two, God is all good. And, three, suffering and evil seem to thrive in our world, nonetheless. If God can do anything, so the argument goes... If God is all good, then why do suffering and evil persist? Why do horrible, tragic, ungodly things happen to good people, especially the innocent? Think of Auschwitz. Think of 9/11... Think of childhood cancer... Think of a young family killed as a result of drunk driving... There's no doubt about it. Evil and suffering represent the single most compelling argument against the existence of a loving God who cares for us.

Various explanations have been proposed, of course. Again, however, none of them are entirely satisfactory. Consider two such answers. There are others, but these two are suggested, first, in today's reading from the Book of Job and, second, in our Gospel reading from Mark.

In today's first reading, we catch God in the midst of a rant of titanic proportions. In fact, we get just a snippet of God's rage in our first reading. The fuller version goes on for pages. Job has dared to question God's treatment of him. Loss after loss: loss of family, loss of possessions, loss of friends, loss of his good health... Still, how dare Job question God? How dare he! No, God is not amused. And so his diatribe against Job...

But here's the thing. Many who've read the book of Job think that he got a raw deal. You see, Job did nothing wrong. In fact, Satan had baited God into "proving" Job's faithfulness by raining evil and enormous suffering down upon him. And to add insult to injury, Job's complaint against God is actually quite mild in tone.

If anything, God's treatment of Job seems arbitrary. It's capricious and undeserved. But God won't be questioned, not by anybody, in fact, and certainly not by Job.

Well, that's one explanation – not a very good one, perhaps – but an explanation, nonetheless. According to the Book of Job, we should accept what comes our way: the good, the bad, and the ugly. Indeed, the Book of Job imagines God as a kind of puppet master, as a God who is “pulling the strings” throughout our lives. No, we couldn't possibly understand God's thinking. Therefore, we should just accept whatever misery comes our way. Yes, that's one answer.

Now our Gospel reading from Mark gives us an entirely different answer. As in the case of Job, evil and suffering seem to have the upper hand in our Gospel reading. No, things don't look good for the disciples. Their small boat is about to capsize. They're at risk of drowning. Without an intervention of some sort, they're all going to die.

And where do we find Jesus? Well, he's taking a nap in the back of the boat. Jesus is apparently oblivious to what is taking place all around him.

And here's where the Book of Job and Jesus part ways. Remember Job's impertinence, his audacity in questioning God. Job's rather mild push-back prompts God's rant and a threat of utter destruction.

Now recall the way in which the disciples speak to Jesus in our Gospel story. Recall the way in which they speak to Jesus, God's only Son. “Teacher, don't you care? Don't you care that we're all about to die? What are you thinking? It's time to get up, Jesus. For heaven's sake, shake a leg!” Talk about impertinence! Hutzpah, in fact! The questions posed by Jesus' disciples drip of sarcasm, and they drip of desperation, too.

Nevertheless, Jesus doesn't punish them. No rant... No threats of destruction... Jesus is disappointed by their lack of faith, sure, but beyond that, no reprimand, no condemnation.

You see, Jesus had invited his disciples into a relationship. And – as we all know, I think – the very best relationships are honest in nature, even when doubt is being expressed, yes, even in moments of great conflict.

And this brings us to a second difference between Job's understanding of evil and suffering and Jesus' understanding. Consider the portrayal of God in the Book of Job. Where do we find him? In heaven, of course, far removed from the world of evil and great suffering that Job is enduring.

And by way of contrast, where do we find Jesus in our Gospel story? Why, in the boat, of course. Jesus is in the boat with his disciples. Yes, Jesus is in the same boat with each and every one of us. That's the meaning of the Incarnation, in fact. As we pray when the water and wine are mingled during the offertory: "By the mystery of the water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity," as he humbled himself to share in the evil we sometimes encounter in our lives and in our suffering, too. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us.

Now, does either explanation – Job's or Jesus' – entirely explain evil? No, not entirely. In the end, evil and suffering are something of a mystery. We even have a name for it. We associate evil and innocent suffering with the Paschal Mystery, with the evil and suffering that Jesus himself endured.

Following Mark's Gospel, however, we can be sure of this. Jesus walks with us in whatever may come our way. Even in our challenging and sometimes tragic moments, we can be sure that Jesus is in the boat with us. He is Emmanuel, God with us.