

THE SABBATH OF SUFFERING

10/14/18 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Proper 23 (B): Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Psalm 22:1-15; ~~Hebrews 4:12-16~~; Mark 10:17-31

We're all familiar with sayings such as "change is inevitable" or "the only constant is change," and most of us realize that we're not alone when we admit, "I don't like change so much." But what about when it's more than just a "change"? What about when, instead of change, we find ourselves in crisis?

I recently had a woman, in the midst of her own crisis, tell me: "our family does crisis really well." They've been through a related challenge several times now, so they've basically worked out how to, as a unit, handle the various components required to keep their lives functioning in the midst of crisis.

But, still, even if we each had a fail-safe response plan in place, I'm guessing very few of us would intentionally go seeking crisis. Just reading a few lines from the diatribe being delivered by Job in our first reading this morning would make most of us run in precisely the opposite direction of a crisis.

Job wails: "Today...my complaint is bitter; [God's] ~~his~~ hand is heavy despite my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find [God] ~~him~~, that I might come even to [God's] ~~his~~ dwelling...God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me; If only I could vanish in darkness!"

If you remember the story, Job was a good, God-fearing man, who prided himself on living a righteous and holy life, and, yet, here he is in the midst of an all-consuming life crisis—everything has gone wrong. Even if it all seems a bit much, it's easy to relate to Job, wallowing there in his self-pity.

Unless, you're one of the more enlightened among us, most of us have this idea—on some level—that if we're doing all the right things...you know, following all the commandments...that we'll, then, avoid suffering; we'll somehow get a free pass out of life's challenges, and our overall existence will just keep getting better and better over time.

But discipleship is tough! It can be very rewarding; it can be grace-filled, and it can be heart-warming, but if we're doing the good work of discipleship, it's going to be messy and complicated, and we'll have to make difficult choices. And, if you haven't noticed, I'm here to tell you, not everybody's going to be happy with all of your decisions. And then...life will happen, and all around us can look like one giant tragedy. Job is a perfect example of that.

Our women's discussion group just finished reading a book called: *Finding Yourself in Transition: Using Life's Changes for Spiritual Awakening*. Robert Brumet wrote this helpful book that offers a sort of step-by-step process of moving through transitions. Much of the material is encouragement that the stages of transition follow a similar pattern for most people, and that we're not odd for feeling a little—or a lot—out of sorts in the midst of transition.

But, most importantly, the author suggests that because crisis doesn't equate to transformation; rather it is how we handle the crisis that can lead to transformation.

Speaking of crisis and suffering, don't you feel sad for the wealthy man mentioned in today's Gospel reading? He just seems so dejected. He was following all the commandments, and he knows Jesus loves him, so he desperately wants to be a follower of Jesus, but Jesus tells

him, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

Now, just in case there are any thoughts going through your mind that Richard and I chose this reading purposely to guilt you into giving as part of our annual pledge campaign, I will remind you that we have a rotation of readings church-wide that we all follow. This just so happens to be the reading chosen for us years ago by the creators of the lectionary. On the other hand, it is quite beautiful how our pledge campaign is integrating with other activities on campus.

For example, you may have discovered by now that the theme for our pledge campaign is "Inspired by God; Transforming lives" and the metamorphosis of an egg, to a caterpillar, to a butterfly is our image. So this butterfly/caterpillar [hold up brochure] image was just mailed out this Tuesday and then in the book group that night same we read this wonderful quote by Richard Bach, author of *Illusions*, that speaks about suffering and crisis. He says: "The mark of your ignorance is the depth of your belief in injustice and tragedy." [I'll read that again] What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the Master calls the butterfly."

And, yet, on this side of transformation, crisis has the tendency to be experienced as pure suffering. The Psalms are full of such lament. Like Job, the Psalmist cries out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me, and are so far from my cry and from the words of my distress? O my God, I cry in the daytime, but you do not answer; by night as well, but I find no rest."

The other day, while I was on a pastoral call at the hospital, I saw a contraption in the bathroom—I'm sure you've seen them; there's a cord hanging there, with a sign on it that reads: "pull here for help". It had been a fairly challenging week, so the first thought that ran through my mind was, "wouldn't that be nice if it were that simple? Any problem, just yank on the cord and help would magically appear!" It'd be like that State Farm commercial, where in the midst of the latest tragedy, through the blink of an eye, the insurance agent immediately shows up to save the day.

And then I remembered. The cord we have in our lives is God. We don't even have to yank on the cord, we simply have to surrender and be open to God's grace. I want to be careful with that word "surrender". Surrender is not denying the complexities of suffering and crisis, but a place of being willing to be fully present to all of that; a place of moving toward acceptance, so that there's room for God's grace to enter in.

A few weeks ago, I mentioned during announcements, that I had attended the sentencing of Tyler, the young man who started the fires in our neighborhood two years ago, one of which destroyed a building on our property. You may remember me saying how heart-wrenching it was to be there. But what I want you to know is that it was also heart-warming. It was life-giving to see God's grace at work. I saw that on Tyler's face as he took in Pastor Laura's and my messages that he is also one of God's beloved. I saw it on the face of his family as they hugged us in appreciation.

We have to take time to notice the beauty of God's grace in the midst of crisis and suffering. So another cord we can yank on is remembering to find time for Sabbath—even if it's only a few moments at a time, in the form of a walk in nature, or just looking at a few favorite photos that make you smile. Your Sabbath doesn't have to be an entire day. But we all need moments of beauty. Rabbi Carlebach said this in an interview about Sabbath:

The hardest thing in the world is this: while you serve God, you have to be in paradise. You have to be aware that the world is so holy, so beautiful, so deep. There is no evil in the world.

There are moments where you have to realize that there is evil, and you have to help get rid of it. In Kabbalistic terms this is the difference between the weekdays and the Sabbath.

On the Sabbath I am living in the world that is completely holy. During the week I am aware that there is evil in the world and I have to clean it out. If you live only in paradise and ignore the other six days of the week, you'll go crazy because it's not true.

But if you live only in the six days of the week, you're never aware of how beautiful the world is. If you can't see that beauty behind all the ugliness then you're not the one to clean up the world. You become part of the evil.

That is the Good News...yes, discipleship is tough, but it's not without it's rewards, and in the midst of challenges, there is the assurance, that through the life, death and resurrection of our savior Jesus Christ, death does not have the final word. In the midst of crisis, suffering does not have the final word. There is always the opportunity for transformation, which can lead us to completely unexpected, but grace-filled places! As our Gospel declares, "through God, all things are possible!"

-AMEN

Collect of the Day:

Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, that we may continually be given to good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Job 23:1-9, 16-17

Job said: "Today also my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy despite my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling!

I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. I would learn what he would answer me, and understand what he would say to me. Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; but he would give heed to me. There an upright person could reason with him, and I should be acquitted forever by my judge.

"If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him. God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me; If only I could vanish in darkness,
and thick darkness would cover my face!"

Psalm 22:1-15

- 1 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? *
and are so far from my cry
and from the words of my distress?
- 2 O my God, I cry in the daytime, but you do not answer; *
by night as well, but I find no rest.
- 3 Yet you are the Holy One, *
enthroned upon the praises of Israel.
- 4 Our forefathers put their trust in you; *
they trusted, and you delivered them.
- 5 They cried out to you and were delivered; *
they trusted in you and were not put to shame.
- 6 But as for me, I am a worm and no man, *
scorned by all and despised by the people.
- 7 All who see me laugh me to scorn; *
they curl their lips and wag their heads, saying,
- 8 "He trusted in the LORD; let him deliver him; *
let him rescue him, if he delights in him."
- 9 Yet you are he who took me out of the womb, *
and kept me safe upon my mother's breast.
- 10 I have been entrusted to you ever since I was born; *
you were my God when I was still in my mother's womb.
- 11 Be not far from me, for trouble is near, *
and there is none to help.

- 12 Many young bulls encircle me; *
strong bulls of Bashan surround me.
- 13 They open wide their jaws at me, *
like a ravening and a roaring lion.
- 14 I am poured out like water;
all my bones are out of joint; *
my heart within my breast is melting wax.
- 15 My mouth is dried out like a pot-sherd;
my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; *
and you have laid me in the dust of the grave.

Hebrews 4:12-16

~~The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.~~

~~Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.~~

Mark 10:17-31

As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age--houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and

children, and fields, with persecutions--and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."