

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 5, 2012

Did you have any reaction to the first reading this morning? Is there a gloomier person in the Scriptures than Job? Life is drudgery, a drag, endless days, restless nights, months of misery, time flies, no hope. Ending with, "I shall not see happiness again." And we all say, "Thanks be to God." Job makes you feel the weight of the world.

Now, Job has a right to his words. He has lost everything – possessions, lands, children, not only the shirt off his back, but even the skin off his body as it breaks out in boils. Job knows what it is like to be crushed by life's burdens. We sometimes speak of the patience of Job, but really, he is not particularly patient. He moans and groans for most of forty chapters, until God finally says, Enough, already! And goes on, not to answer, but to utter in divine defense some of the most beautiful poetry in the Scriptures. Even so, God's response comes down to, Who are you to question me? And Job, in the end, yields.

I think we continue to read Job because he articulates a very real and true part of life – we all have those days when there is sadness, loss, loneliness, aching desire for love, days when we can find no reason to hope, when we feel crushed by life. We continue to read Job because on those days we find in him a kindred spirit. He reminds us that it is all right to lament our loss, and to question and argue with God. But remember, too, that Job does not lose faith. He refuses to lie down and roll over, much less to follow the advice of his wife, when she urges him to "Curse God and die." Job holds on to God through it all.

The Gospel today also has its share of gloom. Sickness and possession by demons is the human condition that Jesus encounters. In the first chapter of his Gospel, Mark gives us a day in the life of Jesus. It begins with Jesus going into a synagogue on the Sabbath and freeing a man possessed by a demon. It continues with what we heard today when Jesus goes into Simon's home and finds Simon's mother-in-law sick in bed. She has been struck down by an illness and can't get

up. There follows a beautiful moment: Jesus reaches out, touches her, and raises her up. (This is the same word used about Jesus when the Father “raises him up” to new life at the resurrection). And she, the raised one, then serves those around her. (The word *serve* is also a special word, later used for Christian ministry). The sick woman is restored to the community so that she can minister.

Then there follows a moving scene to see through your imagination. Word has spread about what Jesus has done. As the sun is setting, people are coming from all over Capernaum to the house: friends of Peter and of his mother-in-law, and friends of friends, and then strangers, and even people visiting the city. They come carrying their loved ones – the sick, the weak, the elderly, the children. And they lift them up. It is dusk. Not only the sun, but despair is setting.

Into the drudgery of life, into its sadness and despair, into its hopelessness comes the One sent to raise up, the One sent to heal and restore to wholeness, to liberate and set free from all that oppresses our bodies and spirits. He is the One who will be revealed most fully in his suffering and dying on the cross. This Jesus is presented to us today first as healer and exorcist, but also as pray-er and preacher. He touches us not only with his hands but also with his words. He emphasizes this at the end of the Gospel when he says: “Let us go on to the nearby villages that I may preach there also. For this purpose have I come.” Jesus is compelled to preach the Gospel. It is through both his words and his actions that the heavy weight of life’s burdens can be lifted from us. Paul, too, was compelled to preach the Gospel, as we heard this morning: “Woe to me if I do not preach it!”

The power of God proclaimed in preaching is a power that is at work in us. The power of God that raises up those who are struck down is at work in us, for us, and through us. This power brings peace and reconciliation and forgiveness and mercy to others. It is not the only power in the world, as we well know. But it is important to hold on to the fact that God’s power continues to enter the world, and to work through all those who live lives of service. And to this power we are called to witness for the sake of the next generation. An essential part of our service in the world is to hand on our faith to the next generation.

May we live in the awareness that, despite the powers that can threaten to overwhelm and crush us, there is a greater power that has been given to us: the power of God revealed in Jesus Christ. For this we give thanks today.

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