

Where is God?

Where is God in all of this? Where is God in my illness, in my suffering? Where is God when I cry out for release from pain? Where is God when I need God?

That is the question Job asks so plaintively, so agonizingly, in our First Testament reading today. We heard in the reading last week that Job had some sort of skin disease: he is covered with loathsome sores, and he has to go away, apart from any other human contact, because in those days people with skin diseases were thought to be unclean and contagious and dangerous—he has to go away from human contact, and sit on the garbage heap, with a broken piece of pottery to scrape the weeping from his sores. But that wasn't the worst of Job's sufferings. The story goes that Job had had everything: flocks and herds, wealth, a large family of grown children he prayed for and who prayed for him everyday. Job had everything, and he lived with integrity and gave thanks to God for everything he had. But Job's faith in God was tested when all the things that made faith seem worthwhile were taken away from him. Thieves came and stole all of Job's oxen and donkeys; lightning fell and burned up the sheep; enemies came and stole all the camels; the house where Job's sons and daughters were feasting collapsed and killed them all. And when everything else had been taken away from Job, Job himself fell ill and his very life was very nearly taken from him too. And that's why Job is out there, sitting on the garbage heap, scraping his sores, wondering where God is.

“Oh, that I knew where I might find God,” Job says, “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.” In all his anguish, Job believes that if he could just come to God, if he could just make his case before God, then he could convince God that he does not deserve to suffer like this, and God would restore to him everything he had lost, and God would bring his suffering to an end. “Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power?” Job says; “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.” Even after everything that has happened to him, Job believes that God would reach down from heaven and make everything alright if Job could just find God and make his case.

But that's the problem: Job can't find God. Job says “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.” Everywhere Job looks—on all sides, from the heights to the depths—everywhere Job looks, he cannot find God. As much as he pleads to bring his case before the Divine Judge, Job cannot find God. As much as he prays for release from his suffering, Job cannot find God. So he's left on his ash heap, left in his illness, left on the border of despair, asking “Where is God in all of this?”

And in asking that question, Job gives voice to all of us who have ever asked that question in our lives too. Where is God in the midst of my suffering?, we ask. Where is God when I pray and pray and pray for the cancer to go away, and nothing happens? Where is God when I pray and pray and pray for Grandma to get better, and nothing happens? Where is God when I pray and pray and pray to find a job, or that the benefits check will cover expenses this month, or that I won't have to make a choice between buying medicine and buying food, and nothing happens? Where is God when I pray and pray and pray that the depression will lighten and I'll be able to feel joy and strength in life again, and nothing happens? Where is God when I need God?, we ask. Where is God in all of this?

Job asks “Where is God?” and Job cannot find God. And perhaps that's because Job is looking for God in the wrong place. Job is looking for a God before or behind him, to the right or to the left; Job is looking for a God outside himself, a God who dwells on high, far above him, and who can reach down

from heaven and with a snap of the divine fingers make everything alright again. But perhaps that's not the right place to look for God.

Our reading from Hebrews this morning suggests we look for God in a different place. Hebrews says: "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." The place to look for God, Hebrews says, is within ourselves, in our most intimate places, in the thoughts and intentions of our hearts, in the very fabric of our bodies. There is an Islamic saying, "God is closer to us than our own arteries"; Hebrews says God is closer to us than our joints and our marrow. The place to look for God, Hebrews says, is in the connection between soul and spirit, in that mysterious place where our own individual life and personality and being comes into contact with the greater Spirit of God that blows through all creation and animates all becoming. The place to look for God, Hebrews says, is in Jesus, who was tested and tried and tribulated in every way as we are, and who took that suffering and by God's grace transformed it into compassion and empathy and love and joy and life. We see that in today's Gospel story: when a rich man comes running up to Jesus to ask anxiously how he can get into heaven, Jesus looks at him and loves him; and if Jesus loves him, then think how it must have hurt for Jesus, when the man turns away and will not accept the invitation to come and follow Jesus on the Way to eternal life. Time and time again in the Gospels we see Jesus willing to embrace pain and suffering—the pain and suffering of the sick and the poor and the sinful who come to him, and his own pain and suffering in rejection and humiliation and torture and death—time and time again in the Gospels we see Jesus taking on pain *and transforming it* by God's grace into compassion and love and resurrection life. And that is what Jesus dwelling in our hearts, in our joints and marrow, in our soul and spirit, can do too.

Once I visited a woman who was in hospice care, dying with cancer. She was angry: she was angry at God for not curing her, she was angry at her body for breaking down and causing such pain, she was angry at the people in her life for letting her down, she was angry at life itself because she felt she had been cheated of the happiness she felt she had deserved. She said to me "One of these days I want to talk to you about why God would let this happen—but not today. I'm not up for that today." So instead of talking about her anger we talked about the bird feeder outside her window, and the view down to the lake, and the pictures her grandchildren drew for her, and what she had enjoyed the last time she visited her son in Florida. We talked, and shared just a little time of compassion and empathy and caring for each other. And when I got up to leave and said "I'll be back to see you again tomorrow," she said "Thank you" and smiled—and in that smile I saw such joy, that guarded and cynical look she so often wore was gone, there was genuine happiness—and there was something else, something I can't quite put into words, but something that looked to me like peace. That day we shared a simple moment of compassion—and in that moment God was present, God was there at the joint of her soul and Spirit, God was working to take her pain and transform it into something good. That's where God was for her.

When it comes right down to it, our scriptures today tell us that the good news of God in Christ is not that God will fix it so that we will never suffer, but the good news is that God will walk with us through suffering, and lead us to love and joy and resurrection on the other side. When it comes right down to it, the good news of God in Christ is not that God will reach down from heaven and rescue us from all our pain, but that we may reach to the presence of God within us, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need, so that with God's help we may transform our pain into something good.

Where is God in all of this? God is *here*, God is with us, Christ dwells within us, the Spirit animates and strengthens us, so that we may take the pain and the suffering we encounter in this world and transform them into compassion and love and life in Christ. Today let it be our prayer that we may we always look to God within, and always reach out to each other with love. Amen.