

Faith, Hope and Trust in Hard Times

Job 23.1-9; 23.16-17, Psalm 22.1-15, Hebrews 4.12-16, Mark 10.17-31

What do you think of today's readings? Any common theme or something that particularly struck you? [...]

When I first read these passages of scripture, along with the true voice of the text, I heard this version:

- I hate my life.
- Why is everything so hard?
- Where are you?
- Why do you help other people but not me?
- I did everything you asked, what more do you want from me?

These are some complaints I noticed in today's readings. I'm sure you have heard them before or even thought them yourself.

Have you heard of grawlix? [...]

Grawlix is also called "obscenicon" or "symbol swearing" and refers to the use of typographical symbols in place of an obscenity (e.g., "\$%@!"). Grawlix is frequently used in comic strips to indicate that a character is thinking or saying a swear word. Using these symbols enables the writer to say what must not be said. There are some things we are reluctant to say aloud, although they are not all obscenities. Often, they are complaints.

When my daughter was at a certain stage of growing up, I banned her from using some words. They were not the words that you might replace with grawlix, but generalisations about the unfairness of the whole world, words like everybody, nobody, always, and never, or variations on those words.

Complaining to God or questioning God is very common. A recent Christian faith-based poll asked, "If you could ask God only one question and you knew he would give you an answer, what would you ask?"

What would you ask? [...]

The most common response in the poll was, "Why is there pain and suffering in the world?" This question covers a lot of ground, including the other common variation, "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

Most times when I preach, I like to share the Good News of Jesus Christ, the glory of God, the fullness and the wonder of God's love for us, shown through the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the opportunity to share God's love for us and others, and for the whole of creation.

But, and it's a big but, echoing Rev. Andy's sermon last week, I would never want to give the impression that if you have faith, then being a

Christian is all sweetness and light, and Christians are unscathed by pain and sorrow. This is absolutely and definitely not true, and it never was.

Today's readings show us the darker and more difficult side of life, and how that fits with living Kingdom lives, walking in the light and love of Christ.

We all complain sometimes, and we all hear the complaints of others. Natural disasters and human failings abound and are a part of our lives. Life is imperfect. We can acknowledge that reality.

Our expectations are not always reasonable. Others have their own reasons for their choices. The world also endures many natural disasters, and sometimes things just happen.

T.S. Eliot said that the most profound line in literature is from Dante's *Divine Comedy*. "In His will is our peace."

Fr. Laurence Freeman is an English Benedictine monk, a Catholic priest and the head of the World Community for Christian Meditation. In the context of his currently undergoing treatment for cancer, he has said, "There are blessings in everything that happens to us, including those things we would not choose."

I believe that this is true, but it is also very difficult. I think it is easier to think of blessings not as being in those difficult and unwelcome things, but as being enabled by those experiences. They are blessings that might not be enabled in other ways. For example, some, through their experiences, become a blessing to others who are suffering in similar ways. Some might find, through the Spirit, resources or disciplines or perspectives within themselves that they might not have found in other ways.

Fr. Laurence spoke of those blessings in this way, "They include the obvious one of living in the present moment, just doing the next thing you should do confidently and not speculating endlessly about the unknown. That is also part of the secret of peace. Another thing is that life is about more than choice. It is also - and perhaps most importantly - about acceptance."

You know the prayer about accepting the thing we cannot change. Acceptance is not thinking we deserve terrible things or that God wants us to suffer them. It is something that we find in Job and in the Psalms. This is not a blind acceptance, but an acceptance based on faith, hope and trust. These things (faith, hope and trust) do not come from nowhere. They come from a lifetime of knowing the love of God, through good times and bad.

In our OT reading, Job is searching for answers, even when he is not sure if there are any answers. He longs to tell God all his problems and needs. Will God fix everything? Job is not certain of this, but he really wants to put his case, to pour his heart out. He is confident that God cares about him,

but he is not confident that God will do whatever he (Job) wants. After all, God's knowledge is greater than Job's knowledge. Job does not doubt God's love, but does that mean that God will act in the way Job wants?

You may have asked God for something, and it did not happen, but later there was something good or even better. Or you might, like Job, have shared your circumstances and your feelings and just placed it in God's hands, not certain of what might happen, but confident that God loves you no matter what. If there was something like that in your life, you might like to share just a little of it, not necessarily today but some day, in our sharing time. Something to think about.

Job's final life circumstances were good, even very good, but of course that did not take away the pain and loss that he had endured. We might say that he came through a different man, and he treasured the degree of restoration in which he found God's blessing. We will get to that another day.

When we look at psalms of lament, they often start with the difficult and painful but conclude with trust in the goodness and mercy of God. Today's psalm, psalm 22, is most famous for its association with the crucifixion of Jesus. However, it is not the only psalm of lament. These psalms are raw and honest, and they remind us that we are not alone in our troubles.

In Psalm 22, we have the feeling of abandonment:

*¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me:
why are you so far from helping me
and from the words of my groaning?*

And the trust in God:

*²¹ LORD, do not forsake me;
do not be far from me, my God.
²² Come quickly to help me,
my Lord and my Savior.*

Despite our reluctance to accept it, the reality of suffering is there in scripture. It is there in the stories of people's experiences as well as in direct teaching about the Christian faith and the broader relationship with God that runs right through the Bible from beginning to end.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus says, '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, ³⁰ 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. (Mark 10.29-30) That sounds lovely, but which 2 words did I leave out? [...]

In the Beatitudes, Jesus says, Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. (Matthew 5. 10)

Psalm 23, that psalm so well-known and so well-loved, brings together troubles and trust.

Think also of John 9, the man born blind; Luke 13, the massacre on the temple mount (the blood of the innocent mixed with Roman sacrifice); and the collapse of the tower of Siloam. No-one sinned and deserved these things. They just happened through the cruelty of others or through natural events.

Matthew 5 says, “For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that?”

God loves us in all circumstances and even before we love God. Can we share God’s love and love others in the same way, in all their varied circumstances?

Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis is a public theologian and senior minister at Middle Collegiate Church, New York, a building they share with the Shul of New York, a liberal non-denominational synagogue which holds Shabbat services in their building.

When their church sanctuary was destroyed by fire, affecting both congregations, she said, “We were beat down with COVID, grief, and the excruciating pain of racial terror in our nation, but we knew—in our suffering—that our God did not cause it. We knew that no God wants the suffering the fire caused, because no God who loves us would design our sorrow. We knew our partner could dance, could guide us through the difficult terrain. We only needed to lean on the everlasting arms.... We knew our dance partner’s intention for the world is for flourishing.”

Their fire was not our fire. We have our own fires, but can turn to the same God in which we find our flourishing in good times and times of sorrow.

May it be so. Amen.