

[Readings: Job 7:1-4, 6-7; Ps. 147; 1 Cor 9:16-19, 22-23; Mark 1:29-39]

It is something that we -- still locked into the global plague of COVID-19 -- know far too well. We understand what it means to worry about loved ones in nursing facilities whom we cannot visit. We have experienced the hospitalization of friends and loved ones, some who survived and some who have not. We know the loneliness of not being able to gather with one another, to celebrate the mysteries of life and death that are part of being human. I sure miss our parish gatherings and event. We know.

Job did not possess this knowledge at the beginning of the book named after his own initiation into suffering. Everything that Job had, including his wealth, his children, his happiness, and even his own personal health -- is taken away from him. Further, he endures accusations upon the part of his friends. They accuse him of infidelity against the Law. Job surely did something to deserve this kind of suffering.

“Just admit it, Job. You are unfaithful.”

Job’s confession of the brevity of life, of its tragic character, is an answer to his friends’ allegations. He has been faithful to God unto the end. And yet, the tragedy of life is inevitable. What is given is to be taken away. We live and then we die. End scene. If one stays with the Book of Job until the bitter end, one learns the folly of Job’s response. Job is accepting the tragedy of life as it is.

“What are we to do?” Job asks, “Just accept the misery and move on.”

I always chuckle whenever I come upon a depressing Bible reading. Usually, we turn to the Sacred Scriptures for words of encouragement and hope, not what we hear today: “Life is a drudgery. I cannot sleep, the nights seems endless. I will never know happiness again.” Then the Lector enthusiastically says, “The Word of the Lord.” And we reply equally enthusiastically, “Thanks be to God!” But at the conclusion of the Book of Job, we hear a different response. This suffering, this misery of life, is part of a broader plan hidden from the foundations of the world, St. Paul says in Colossians 1:26. Only God, the creator of the cosmos and the slayer of chaos, knows what it all means.

Since Job was not there at the beginning before all beginnings, how can we presume to know? We cannot solve the mystery of life. Spoiler alert: We are not God!

Jesus' healings are the beginning of an answer to Job's cry from the heart. Yes, life is hard — it is for many, a tragedy. And yet, Jesus Christ has come into the world to heal the sick. He preaches and heals, revealing not a stoic disregard for the tragedy of life. And here is the main point of my homily:

God is faithful to us in our suffering. God is faithful in His beloved Son unto the very end. God is there in our darkness, in our suffering. He comes to heal us in our woundedness. He orders the chaos of our lives through the presence of His beloved Son. Job got it wrong. Job's stoicism, our stoicism, is wrong.

In this plague, let us not embrace a similar stoic attitude. Let us not say, "Well, we all die, don't we?" Rather, let us recognize that death was not the plan. Suffering was not why God created us.

The empathy we have for those suffering in COVID-time, whether from illness or loneliness, is real. It should wound us, as our fellow men and women suffer from the wages of sin and death. And let us follow the path of Our Lord, Who does not abandon us in suffering. But faithfully dwells with us unto the end.

Last week, we listened to Jesus as He teaches in the synagogue on the very first, very busy day of His three years of public ministry. Although few of us can claim teaching as our profession, each of us can still teach by example. Some of life's most important lessons – love, forgiveness, patience, compassion, fidelity – are learned more outside the classroom than inside it.

Jesus does something equally miraculous – He confronts the evil that possesses a man. Later that day, as we hear in today's Gospel, Jesus spends the late night healing all kinds of illnesses and expelling all kinds of demons. Jesus confronts anything that stands in the way of God's Kingdom. While you and I may not have the power or the authority to cast out demons, we still have the power to cast out many evils around us and within us. Do we hold grudges?

Does our unwillingness to forgive stand in the way of reconciliation with others? Imagine the miraculous difference you and I would make if, by the grace

of God, we could cast out THOSE demons! Also, we CAN heal the sick and lonely simply by being present to them as Jesus was. Jesus did not say He was “too busy” or “too stressed.” How did He get re-energized to do all this?

Jesus re-fuels Himself by leaving the busy-ness of his work and going off to a deserted place, where He prays. In that deserted place, Jesus quiets Himself and communes with God. Because of this, Jesus finds Himself grounded and centered entirely on God, and to the service of God’s people. Where is YOUR “deserted place?” A bedroom, a corner of the living room or family room? A room that has a lot of ceramic tile in it? Mine is my “man-cave” on the second floor of the rectory!

Now, if both Jesus needed to pray in order to do God’s work, how much more so do you and I need to do the same. It should be abundantly clear that prayer makes all the difference. If we begin and end each day in prayer, and come to this altar table every Sunday; if we listen to God in Scripture and receive the Risen Lord in the Eucharist, we more closely resemble Jesus.

When we teach by good example and confront evil, when we heal and pray, we become the very presence of Christ in the world. Through us living our days with the companionship of Jesus, the world will not only imagine, but will know the love of God in Christ Jesus.

What you and I can accomplish in our busy days may depend on what we do early in the morning and late at night. By surrendering to God first and last every day, we acknowledge that any good we accomplish is only flowing through us. This frees us from any notion that we ourselves are the source. For the people of Galilee, the many healings performed by Jesus in and around Capernaum in today’s Gospel could have only come from the hand of God.

And so it is with us. AMEN!