

"Invisibility"
Job 30:20-31
July 21, 2019
Access Sunday

Suffering. The human condition. Job suffered much. He asked, "Why?" He asked, "Why me?" And he put his questions directly to God. He asked his questions persistently, passionately, and eloquently. He refused to take silence for an answer. He refused to take the clichés of his friends for an easy answer. He refused to let God off the hook. Job speaks our questions of God when we are good people and horrible things happen to us anyway. From Job, chapter 30, beginning at the 21st verse, hear how Job gives voice to human pain in the face of God's silence:

"I shout for help, God, and get nothing, no answer!

I stand to face you in protest, and you give me a blank stare!
You've turned into my tormenter—
you slap me around, knock me about.
You raised me up so I was riding high
and then dropped me, and I crashed.
I know you're determined to kill me,
to put me six feet under.

"What did I do to deserve this?

Did I ever hit anyone who was calling for help?
Haven't I wept for those who live a hard life,
been heartsick over the lot of the poor?
But where did it get me?
I expected good but evil showed up.
I looked for light but darkness fell.
My stomach's in a constant churning, never settles down.
Each day confronts me with more suffering.
I walk under a black cloud. The sun is gone.
I stand in the congregation and protest.

I howl with the jackals,
I hoot with the owls.
I'm black-and-blue all over,
burning up with fever.
My fiddle plays nothing but the blues;
my mouth harp wails laments."

Here ends the reading. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

You don't know me. My name is not recorded anywhere. I have done nothing to get noticed. People walk by me day after day, looking the other way, being careful not to lock eyes with me, often moving to the other side of the road so as not to have to pass too close to me.

My family is ashamed. I am lesser. I am a blight upon their reputation. I will never bring honor to my father and I will not be the one to help my aging mother to her bed when she needs assistance. I am a pariah; God could not possibly love me! What did I do to deserve my affliction?

This morning I asked our children what they saw in this photograph I showed them. What do you see? Or should I ask, what do you see first?

The image at the end of this writing is of a woman and a horse and the woman is in a wheelchair (scroll down). Did your eyes go immediately to the chair? Do you feel sorry for her, a woman with a disability? How many of us have any interest to go deeper with her, learning her name or her story?

In the film I will be showing this morning, "The Upside," Philip LaCasse is a man with quadriplegia. He was paralyzed in a paragliding accident. In this true story, Dell Scott, an ex-convict trying to find a job to appease his parole officer, by mistake applies for the job of being Philip's caregiver, or as the position is sanitized, his "life auxiliary." Dell thinks he is applying for a job as a handyman.

He is so obviously unqualified to handle the job that it is laughable. He knows nothing about caring for an adult who is unable to sit up without a seat belt strapped across his chest. He doesn't understand why the man in the wheel chair does not shake his hand or get up out of the chair to look him eye-to-eye. He's never even heard of quadriplegia. But he wins the job with his honesty and his naivete. When Mr. LaCasse scoffs at the applicant's lack of understanding and work experience, Dell shoots back at him, "Don't judge me. I ain't judged you!"

Philip is filthy rich. He has everything a man could want, yet nothing that any person wants. Of course, he would trade everything he has—all his wealth-- if he could walk again and use his hands again, wouldn't he?

The question is not so easy to answer, but it's our natural assumption. When our circumstances are *so* bad, when our affliction is *so* grave, when our grief is crushing in on us, we cry out, "Why me? Why have you done this to me, God?"

This is the number one reason why people leave church. People leave church because *God* has failed them. People leave church because *God* has visited upon them some cruelty, *God* has played some sick joke on them, or *God* has not intervened to save them from their horrible and unjust afflictions.

The entire Bible book of Job is about this very idea. Poor Job is the butt of a divine wager between *God* and Satan. The Bible describes him as "blameless and upright, one who feared *God* and turned away from evil." Like Philip LaCasse, he is a wealthy and well-known man. The text brags of the righteous man, Job:

He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants; so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east. (1:3)

Additionally, he had seven sons and three daughters. Notice all the "threes" and "fives" and "sevens" in this passage. In ancient Bible lore, the number 3 represents divine wholeness and perfection. The number 5 is used to underscore *God's* favor upon someone and kindness towards that person, and the number 7 represents completeness and achievement, as in *God* created the world in 6 days and on the 7th, he rested.

Job, therefore, is both favored by *God* and successful by *God's* judgment. Yet, he loses everything he has—his family, his riches, his health, all of it swept away as part of the wager by Satan that if he

loses his material wealth and health, he will also lose his faith in God. Satan loses the bet. Job retains his faith despite all that has happened to him.

Job keeps the faith, but confronts God directly with his question: "Why do bad things happen to good people?" Job is us of course, because we think that generally we are pretty good people. Maybe we are attracted a bit too much to alcohol or sweets or sex or money or gaming or television or politics or the internet or a whole host of other distractions, but we generally think we are okay people. The story of Job puts firmly into our heads the doubt, "Does God make bad things happen to us?"

What is your worst fear? What is the worst that could happen to you? Is it the fear of going blind, or the fear of being left alone where no one cares about you? I have often feared just what happened to Philip LaCasse—being paralyzed, and I came way too close to that already. One inch to the right or left as I flew out that windshield on I-70 in 1977 and I would have a very different life story. We all have that one "but-for" moment, don't we? Whew!

But for Philip LaCasse, he didn't. He had the story we dread. In an instant, he was Job. He lost his identity in the world. Once a famous author, speaker, and socialite, and a bachelor in hot demand, in an instant he was an invisible nobody in a wheelchair. No more speaking

engagements. No more parties. No more exciting adventures. And the only dating relationship he risks are through letters he writes to his fantasy love, because she does not have to see him and face the reality of his day-to-day drudgery. As his trusted assistant, Yvonne, describes him, "Everything about Philip's life is about his care. His world is very small."

Small... and discounted. Philip is ignored in a donut shop; the counterman asks *Dell* what Philip would like rather than addressing Philip directly. Philip laments, "I'm invisible unless they know I have money."

A snooty neighbor is concerned only that Dell is a black, convicted felon. He is afraid that Dell will bring down the building's pristine socialite image, not that Philip might receive the care and dignity he seeks and needs.

And when Philip at last meets in person his romantic pen pal, she cannot see beyond his disability into the same heart that wrote her such incredible prose; she can't see past the bit of food that has dropped onto his neck scarf. For her, it's "a lot." He is invisible to her.

In ancient times, God was often thought of as judgmental. This was not a shocker to the Hebrews, the Israelites, or later to the Jews. But along comes Christ, and the faithful are hopeful that God softens from the harsh judgment of Old Testament times, that Jesus

teaches God how to love the people again. Jesus preaches love and shows unconditional acceptance. The bad things disappear and never again afflict the faithful. Right?

Wrong. The bad things still happen. People are still afflicted. They still suffer-- greatly. He himself is arrested, tortured, and executed. His followers are hunted down and disposed of. Paul is imprisoned and then silenced. The faith nearly dies out. Somehow though, the Spirit of God presses on and two thousand years later, here we are in a Christian church.

Those are some of us here who have decided that asking the questions of God in community beats walking away from faith in disgust. But bad things still happen. Babies die in childbirth; old people die alone without family around them. Kids get cancer; adults get divorced. Strokes take away limbs and heart attacks rob the very breath that is meant to sustain us. We are widowed, we are invisible, we are afflicted, and sometimes we are lonely. In times such as these we, like Job, may go directly to God and cry out, "Why me?"

Eugene Peterson wrote the following about the universality of Job:

This is the suffering that first bewilders and then outrages us. This is the kind of suffering that bewildered and outraged

Job, for Job was doing everything right when suddenly everything went wrong. And it is that kind of suffering to which Job gives voice when he protests to God...Job says boldly what some of us are too timid to say. He makes poetry out of what in many of us is only a tangle of confused whimpers. He shouts out to God what a lot of us mutter behind our sleeves. He refuses to accept the role of a defeated victim.

Maybe you have felt like a defeated victim. Maybe you are angry with God to the place of blind fury. Maybe, like Philip LaCasse and Dell Scott, you ask, "What's the point?" and feel like giving up. All you see is darkness. As Barbara Brown Taylor calls it, "Christianity has never had anything nice to say about darkness. From earliest times, Christians have used 'darkness' as a synonym for sin, ignorance, spiritual blindness, and death."

Sometimes we don't know how to be faithful when we feel grief and sadness close in on us, so hopelessly alone in our suffering are we, unsure of how to be in community with God who is supposed to love us without reservation. When in the darkness, remember that God who in God's time called out to Job from within a whirlwind is calling out to us, too. God may be invisible to us in the ways we demand, but God is made known to us in the little things we may not appreciate in our distress: in our friends who stick by us, in our hymns that sing to us, in our prayers that unite us with the mystery, in the small hands of our grandchildren reaching for our arthritic ones, in the smile of the person who does not cross the road to avoid us, in the Holy Spirit's

fruit that informs us, in the tail that wags just for us, in the church that welcomes us just as we are, in the feel of cool grass on our bare feet and the warming sun on our face lifted up to the heavens in supplication. God is present to us in myriad ways. "And so," as Eugene Peterson reminds us,

We gain hope—not from the darkness of our suffering, not from the pat answers of [well-meaning friends and family and books and religion], but from the God who sees our suffering and shares our pain.... The mystery of God eclipses the darkness and the struggle. We realize that suffering calls *our* lives into question, not God's. The tables are turned: God-Alive is present to us. God *is* speaking to us. And so, Job's experience is confirmed and repeated once again in our suffering and our vulnerable humanity.

We look at Philip LaCasse and see a man with quadriplegia. We look at Dell Scott and see a dangerous black ex-con. We look again at the woman with the horse and see her wheelchair. But how do you suppose the horse sees *her*?

Aaahh, that is the Divine Mystery calling us out of invisibility, out into the light of possibility and able-ness. That is Divine Love calling on us to see the humanity in the *father* begging in the street and in the *mother* afflicted with leprosy, in our *son* who is sentenced to prison, and our daughter who is staring at the bottle of OxyContin and trying to ignore its Siren call. That is the fruit of the Holy Spirit giving us the courage to walk into the nursing home for a visit with one who no longer can call us by our name and to walk with our child as he or she

walks down the aisle to be wed to their same-gender beloved. That is Faithfulness, Generosity and Gentleness, that is Joy, Kindness, and Love all wrapped into one, it is Patience and Peace, and it is Self-Control.

We are not alone out there in God's vast universe. God has not left us alone to deal with life without help. We have each other; we have the words of our Christ. We have the Holy Spirit; we have intellect and emotion and relational capacity as well.

What does the horse see when it sees the woman's smile?
May It Be So.

