

“Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child” – Teresa Holden

Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Psalm 26; Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16

Today's Old Testament Scripture causes us to reflect on the theme of suffering. We are considering an individual, Job, who experienced great suffering and not because he deserved to suffer. While suffering is not something any of us wants, the book of Job serves as a reminder that this experience is common to all humanity. Our Hebrews Scripture suggests that our experience of pain is something that Jesus understands first-hand, so that when we suffer, we are following in the footsteps of Christ. Further, we can find healing and growth in our pain by having faith that allows us to transcend our immediate circumstances.

Our Scripture for today describes Job as being “blameless and upright,” a man “who feared God and turned away from evil.” The Lectionary skips a large portion of Chapter 1 of Job in which we learn that not only is he a devout and good man who wholeheartedly endeavors to serve God sincerely, but also he is materially blessed. He is a married man (to one wife, I might add), a father with ten children. He possesses huge herds of sheep, camels, oxen and donkeys, and he has many servants to wait on him and his family. Job 1 says he is “the greatest man among all the people of the East.” In fact, we find Job being tested precisely because of his considerable blessings and his faithfulness.

A being, literally called the Adversary (not exactly an entity known as Satan), challenges God's own belief in Job by pointing out the fact that Job may have an ulterior motive for being so faithful. The Adversary says to God, ““Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. ¹¹ But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face.” What happens next includes what most agree are the most devastating losses a human can suffer. In chapter 1, all of Job's children die in something like a tornado, and other sorts of disastrous calamities occur and wipe out his herds and his servants. All of his material wealth is gone. Then in today's Scripture, chapter 2, Job becomes afflicted with a terrible skin disorder that, along with his grief (even devastation), over all of his previous losses causes him to be almost overcome.

Job's wife serves as his foil in this story, as she says the opposite of what we get from Job. She asks, “Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God and die!” Of course, Job's wife has shared in his suffering – his losses are her losses. His poverty, is hers, as well. She also has lost almost everything. Her words suggest the hopelessness, the sense of utter defeat and bitterness that we can imagine anyone would feel given these circumstances.

The subsequent chapters of the Book of Job contain his and his friends' musings about how he should handle himself given the horrible straits he finds himself in. Job struggles mightily. He questions himself; he questions God, but he never does as his wife suggests. He never curses God, and he repulses the understandable urge to simply give up.

The book of Job, set in a distant time and place, and about a man who possesses so much more wealth than most of us could even dream of presents the universal truth that human suffering is a part of life. A condition of humanity is unexplainable adversity that befalls people who don't deserve it.

In my previous career as a mental health counselor, this is one of the truths that I struggled with greatly. Working as Greenville College's counselor for five years, I often questioned God myself about why it is that people suffer in ways that they don't deserve. In counseling I would see beautiful, smart young people who had never really done anything wrong, yet who wrestled actively with difficulties they confronted that they usually had never deserved. Loss, abuse, injury, illness – things that dropped into their lives out of nowhere, and they were left to pick themselves up from a state of being devastated and figure out a way to go on, to move forward and make something of their lives.

Maybe you're in that situation now yourself. Maybe you are struggling with a loss or a circumstance that you didn't see coming, you didn't deserve, and it left you crippled in some way. You are hurt and wounded and don't know how to continue. Maybe you're in some sort of existential crisis that makes God seem so very far away and inaccessible. In that case, while Job provides us with the truth that suffering is a universally human condition, I'm not sure he is close enough to us chronologically to help us gain a deeper meaning from suffering. For this, we might look to the example of others who have suffered more recently, and whose sufferings might be more relatable to us. This topic of dealing with suffering was brought home to me through an experience I had recently.

Last week I presented a paper at the national conference of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. While I was there, I attended what was probably the most remarkable conference session that I've ever attended. A standing room only crowd in a ballroom in Pittsburgh's Westin Hotel listened to musician and scholar Beatrice Johnson-Reagon and poet Sonia Sanchez talk about their lives and work. You may not have ever heard of either of these women, but they both have been continuously creating art, music and scholarship for over fifty years. Beatrice Johnson-Reagon was one of the Freedom Singers who accompanied the participants in the Student Non-violent Coordinating Council (SNCC) as they traveled throughout the South and conducted sit-ins during the Civil Rights Movement. She was arrested numerous times for her singing at locations where groups were practicing nonviolent resistance, so that she was expelled from her college, Albany State University in Albany, Georgia for her actions. Since then she has attained a PhD and begun many other musical groups, including the world famous "Sweet Honey in the Rock." Sonia Sanchez was also involved in the Civil Rights movement as a member of the Congress on Racial Equality

(CORE). She was an initiator of the Black Arts Movement and an award-winning teacher and poet. Today as a 78 year old woman, her sole focus is on resisting violence and promoting love.

The session with these two women was remarkable because they engaged in a method of presentation that Johnson-Reagon developed that's called "songtalk." So, as they told about their lives and the issues that are important to them, they interspersed their spoken word with singing – songs that they had previously written together, as well as songs that each made up on the spot. It was completely unscripted. In general, the repetitive nature of poetry reinforces themes. When put to music, this poetry can touch people at their core, and that's what I experienced.

One of the insights I gained through listening to these remarkable women and then mentally processing that experience later is this realization – that "spirituals," (what in my day we grew up calling "Negro Spirituals") these songs (that slaves sang as they worked together and created a shared culture) are based in the reality of a shared experience. Words of a particular song, which many of us probably learned in our public school music classes, have repeated in my mind since that presentation–

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child;
sometimes I feel like a motherless child;
sometimes I feel like a motherless child
a long way from home, a long way from home.
Sometimes I feel like I'm almost gone;
sometimes I feel like I'm almost gone;
sometimes I feel like I'm almost gone,
a long way from home, a long way from home.

What touched my heart as I reconsidered this song is that it was sung by people who had been torn from mothers and families. These people had been sold, often at very young ages, as solitary individuals, who through no fault of their own became motherless children, all alone in the world. They were singing about the devastation they had experienced in their lives.

None of us has experienced the horrors of slavery, but maybe this song can help us to understand the shared human experience of suffering and of how people transcend suffering and find meaning in their lives. Each of us shares in the solitary struggle the words to this song represent – sometimes we each feel cut off from the possibility of anyone else understanding our situation, or what is bothering us. Often, when we struggle, we feel terribly alone, like not even our mothers have the capability of understanding us.

Scholar Arthur C. Jones points out the fact that despite the desperate sadness of the song "Motherless Child," it still holds out hope. The lyric doesn't say, "I ALWAYS feel like a motherless child." Jones explains, "the spiritual that was created by slaves emphasizes the act of crying out, and the automatic transformation that comes as a result of the deep faith of the crier." To me these songs show the same restraint that Job exhibits. The singers are not cursing God, but rather expressing their pain while holding on to their hope in God. Jones also explains the purpose that spirituals play; he says they are: "the expression of grief and suffering, [but they also provide] the capacity to transcend that suffering

Our Scripture from Hebrews echoes this idea that responding with faith to our suffering allows us to transcend ourselves and be more like Christ. Hebrews 2: 9 says:

"we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone." Here we see the idea that Christ's suffering was necessary, but it resulted in his being crowned with "glory and honor." Further we see that Jesus, our role model, was made perfect through suffering. Verse 10 says, "It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of [our] salvation [Jesus] perfect through sufferings."

When we suffer, we follow in the footsteps of Christ, who has all-encompassing empathy for us. Expressing our faith through our words, our songs and our actions when we are suffering provides us with a path that will allow us transcend our suffering. Arthur Jones, in explaining the role spirituals played said, "In order to transcend the suffering, you have to go into the center of the suffering. And as you go into the center of it, you gain the strength to come out of it."

I learned while I was a counselor the fact that pain can be central to growth. The pain of loss can cause us to appreciate life; the pain of loneliness helps us to appreciate companionship; the pain of hunger helps us to know joy when we are satisfied. In the midst our suffering it would be so easy to do as Job's wife suggested, to crawl into our self-made holes, to curse God and die by living a hollow, faithless existence. On the other hand, those who have suffered before us help us to know that making a choice to have faith can allow us to transcend the deepest suffering. I don't say that lightly because I have seen and entered into deep, deep pain, and I know how excruciating it is. I also know that God makes a way for those who suffer, and God will make a way for you, too.