

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

Job 38:1, 8-11 and Mark 4:35-41

For anyone who has survived a flood or a storm at sea, water is a force to be feared. My lifeguard sister taught me to swim in a swollen creek in the wake of Hurricane Agnes. Perhaps my terrifying, exhilarating introduction to water explains my interest in the [Johnstown Flood](#), when a sixty-foot high wall of water slammed into the town and killed over 2,200 people. No wonder ancient European sailors hugged the coastlines and it was not until the seventeenth century that tall ships dared face 150-foot waves south of Cape Horn. Who is not in awe of the [tsunami of 2004](#) that killed almost 230,000 people?

Unsurprisingly, humanity universally uses water imagery to describe suffering. Suffering and water have so much in common: loss of control, danger and probable death, long-term devastation. We hate suffering and our poetic voices use the metaphor of water to shout our fear and pain from the rooftops.

But what if suffering is not the dreaded thing we have made it out to be? After all, we recognize the benefits of water alongside its dangers; maybe there is some benefit to suffering? I am not proposing we go looking for suffering or that we entertain it when it arrives. However, suffering is part of life: we die in some way every day. Prayer helps us recognize how God accompanies us in our suffering, often in ways we do not see. St. Teresa of Avila wrote, "There is an active life of the soul that goes on beneath our awareness." God is always at work changing us, drawing us closer in love.

God prods us into the possibility of looking at suffering differently in the book of Job. When Job loses everything, he demands that God appear and explain why. God appears, all right, but instead of an explanation, God invites Job into a new perspective. We hear a snippet of this as God coos over the fearsome sea. When the sea was born, God dressed it in clouds and wrapped it in swaddling bands of darkness, just as we would dress our newborns. God set limits on the sea for *its* protection and calmed it down, much as we place children in cribs and sooth their tantrums. God has compassion for everything in the universe? Maybe our view is too narrow.

Suffering offers a deeper relationship with God. We lose our false sense of control. We learn more about God, as Job does. God's answer to Job's question, "What did I do to deserve this suffering?" is that humans do not comprehend the scope of the universe or the moral issues of their lives, but God does. Job grows in his appreciation of God's complexity and compassion and this enables him to deal with his suffering. It is a significant step when we pay more attention to who God actually is, full of compassion, rather than our idea of who God is: someone to outfox, a disinterested watchmaker or a judge. It is also significant when we see ourselves as God sees us, dear ones to be saved and cared for.

The Marcan story of the Calming of the Storm also encourages us to look at our suffering differently. The disciples take Jesus in their boat, "just as he was," i.e. he seemed to them simply a really good guy/miracle-worker, but he was actually the Son of God – and they are about to confront that reality. When the storm rages, the disciples seem to be dying and Jesus does not care. However, Jesus does care: with divine power, he commands the waters to muzzle themselves. Notice that Jesus first saves the disciples and then asks them to reflect, not the other way around; God's first action is always compassion. But then they must reflect with Jesus, who does not ask "Why *were* you terrified?" but rather, "Why *are* you terrified?" Of course, we are afraid in the midst of the storm, but why do we live our whole lives in terror? We have Jesus along with us, just as he is, Lord of All and full of compassion. St. Thérèse of Lisieux repeatedly recognized her terror and soothed herself with the reminder that although Jesus seemed to be "sleeping" in her boat, he loved her too much to let any real harm happen. Spiritual and physical suffering continued to beset her, but Jesus always kept her from any real harm. Finally, in our gospel, Jesus asks the disciples, "Do you *not yet* have faith?" In this challenging question, we hear Jesus' hope that the disciples will develop faith in him. I am hopeful that we will do the same.

- ❖ How has God drawn you closer through suffering?
- ❖ We suffer as a community, locally, nationally and globally. Where is God at work in that suffering?

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