

There is no lack of suffering in this world. We shudder as we read, hear or watch the daily news. And unfortunately “what bleeds leads,” so the lead stories always seem to cover wanton violence or natural disasters, one of which is, of course, the virus pandemic. Whether we like it or not, we have to deal with suffering in this world, and we also try to find some meaning as we do so. We had a lovely *a cappella* concert here in the meetinghouse recently by the group Skylark, and they chose as their theme, “It’s a Long Way,” songs to reflect upon a year and a half of pandemic “disruption, isolation, fear, and loss.” Gorgeous voices filling this wonderful space... but with an overall mood of pain and suffering. A central song in the concert was the traditional “Wayfaring Stranger,” which has those haunting words: *I am a poor wayfaring stranger, I'm traveling through this world of woe, Yet there is no sickness, toil, nor danger, In that bright land to which I go.*

As we “travel through this world of woe,” how can faith respond? Our Christian lectionary just happens to be covering the book of Job at this time. So a brief summary of the book might help: The short beginning and the end of the book actually tell the whole story, in prose. Then there is a very long middle section of poetry, theological poetry, trying to make meaning of Job’s story. The story is basically that Job was a good and upright man of highest esteem, who through wind and fire and terrorist tribal attacks lost all his family except his wife, and lost his house and thousands of cattle. Then, as if that weren’t enough, he got sores or boils all over his body from head to foot. It brings up all sorts of questions like WHY did God allow this to happen to such a good man? Why did God allow evil or “the accuser” to ravage Job? So Job’s three friends talk and debate with Job, at great length, about the relationship of sin and suffering. Not being very comforting, they insist that Job is being punished for some sinfulness in his life. Then the voice of God enters the picture and tells them they are all wrong and are dealing with mysteries too

great for for human minds... God's famous challenge to Job is: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding!" Then Job finally surrenders to the idea that God's ways are too far above us to ever truly understand, and he humbly stops his arguments and accusations against God. He humbly accepts his place in creation, so that God then restores his health, and gives him even more children and livestock.

Unfortunately, the book of Job never answers the question of WHY this all happened. Rather, it is interested in HOW Job and his friends deal with the suffering and try to make meaning of it. We could say the overall theme in Job is that of innocent or unjust suffering. It seems that Shakespeare got it right when Hamlet spoke of the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." Outrageous fortune means that there are elements of chance in the universe, for both the good and the bad. We cannot always find a reason or a "cause and effect" for good fortune or bad fortune. Like the treasurer of my first church said when she could not move and was withering away slowly with Lou Gehrig's disease, "Some say Why Me? ... but I also say Why NOT me?" From car accidents, to earthquakes, to cancer, to birth defects, we could all ask, "Why NOT me?"

Another question is, of course, "Where is God?" If we can't get an answer to the WHY of life's sufferings, at least tell us WHERE God is! Well, the book of Job does show us that Job feels he is in contact with God the whole time... that he has a conversational relationship with his Maker throughout all his time of suffering... a conversation that includes honesty about his despair and his anger! When people refer to the "*patience* of Job," that is actually a misnomer, misinformation, a misunderstanding! Job was far from patient! He was angry and impatient with God, and was demanding answers! Job was fully engaged with life, trying to make some meaning out of his tragic circumstances. These Days devotional magazine has great commentaries on Job this month: one of them insists that God's

answer to Job is all about Presence; *Like Job, we may not always know answers to each WHY in our life, but we can be assured that God, who laid the foundations of the world, is present. God is present, has been present, and will be present, whether we are shouting for joy or searching for answers out of a whirlwind.*

So Job's despair is normal. Job's *impatience* and anger is normal. And Job's wisdom of finally "letting go," trusting God (trusting life, or the universe), is a good example for all of us. Of course as Christians, we have the blessing, the help, of looking also to Jesus for comfort or answers. Here again, we have an example in our Teacher and Savior of innocent or unjust suffering. We have Jesus' example of staying fully invested in life and his mission of loving service, despite the outrageous fortune of slings and arrows from the religious and political leaders of his day. As the letter to Hebrews says, in Jesus we have a teacher and friend who is *"able to sympathize with our weaknesses, one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin... Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness so that we may find grace to help in time of need."*

Yes, as followers of Jesus, we have the invitation to call on our Risen Christ at any time, especially in a time of suffering, for He knows our every weakness and need; he has travelled the road of innocent suffering before us and knows that life surely can be "unfair," and to a certain extent we have to accept some suffering and trust there is mercy and goodness as well. Thus Jesus' promise to be PRESENT, to walk beside us, come what may .... is the best and most comforting response to suffering. And since we all have vowed to be serve as Jesus served, we are also companions for each other in this journey of life, come what may. Whether we are caretakers, or are sick and suffering, Loving service is what will always give comfort, healing, and meaning to life. We recall Jesus saying, I have come "not to be served, but to serve." May we both receive and give such love, all the days of our lives. Amen.