

The Tabletop Test

Job 7:1-4, 6-7

February 8, 2015

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Father Dave Mercer, Pastor

St. Thomas of Canterbury Catholic Church, San José, California

I shall not see happiness again. [Job 7:7]

When Dorothy journeys along the Yellow Brick Road, she comes to a crossroad in the middle of a cornfield. When she wonders which way to go, a nearby scarecrow offers confusing advice, and she's greatly surprised that he can talk.

Scarecrow soon confesses an obvious truth, saying, "I haven't got a brain ... only straw." Dorothy replies, "How can you talk if you haven't got a brain?"

"I don't know," says the scarecrow, "but some people without brains do an awful lot of talking ... don't they?"¹

We might not be walking along the Yellow Brick Road, but we're on no less of a journey. As we travel through life, our faith reminds us that our vocation is to do something grander than mere talking. Our vocation is to proclaim the Gospel, the Good News of what God has done for you and me through Jesus Christ.

We are a people who are open to the grace that flows to us when we extend our hands to receive Communion. Indeed, we are a people who know that all of God's creation is full of grace.

We put our faith in Jesus Christ. We accept the share in his divine life that he offers us. Our vocation is to share with others what we have received. Our vocation is to proclaim this as Good News. Our vocation is to put our hope in Jesus Christ.

Today's first reading takes us into the Old Testament story of Job. The tragic story of Job is a type of parable. He was once well off and living the good life, but then he loses everything: possessions, servants, and even his children. And if that isn't bad enough, he ends up with a dreadful disease and can be found sitting on a dung heap.

Job's life is now too painful – utterly unbearable.

He does have visitors, friends who express the false wisdom that he must have done something evil to bring on such punishment. And yet, Job did nothing terrible. In fact, he's absolutely innocent of any wrongdoing, but now his life is so wretched that he curses the day he was born. He expresses his misery, restlessness, hopelessness, and unhappiness, saying:

I have been assigned months of misery, and troubled nights have been allotted to me ... I am filled with restlessness until the dawn. My days ... come to an end without hope. Remember that my life is like the wind; I shall not see happiness again.

Job later realizes that looking for a logical reason to explain suffering leads to nowhere. Despite his horrible circumstances, he will not abandon God. So, he turns to God and complains, and God's reply serves to remind us of our human limitations to fully understand life and God's role in our lives.

This ancient parable reminds us that sometimes there is no answer to why people suffer. All we can do is to imitate Job who eventually gives up fighting God, surrenders to God, and learns to trust God's ultimate goodness.

The story of Job is our story, too.

When I began reflecting on the story of Job, I thought of a term used by technology manufacturers: the *tabletop test*. Engineers today design some wonderful products: laptop computers, video game consoles, MP3 players, tablets and iPads, Android phones and iPhones. They can build a great looking gadget, but they also need to ask: will it survive how everyday consumers actually use the device? The *tabletop test* asks: what happens if the device is accidentally pushed off a tabletop or dropped on the pavement? Will it still work?

Teenagers: my hope and prayer for you is that you possess a faith that can survive the *tabletop test*. Most of us won't experience the trials that Job experiences in that parable, but each of us can feel knocked around by life. And when that happens, the Gospel reminds us that you and I can access the grace we need to stop fighting God.

As with Job, we know we can never truly understand why suffering exists. We can struggle with the sadness of grief and with deep loss. We have brains, but no amount of talking seems to help when life seems to fall off the table. We're limited by how much we can understand. Still, as with Job, we are a people called to trust in God's ultimate goodness.

I like how Martin Luther King, Jr., put it:

Grace does not get us out of life's challenges, but grace will see us through them.

When misfortune comes our way, when life seems to go from bad to worse, we make a big mistake if we assume there's no way out. We never know what God has in store for us, even when we think there's no hope. As some people have said:

Never put a period where God has placed a comma.²

The scarecrow tells Dorothy that a lot of people do an awful lot of talking. Sometimes, we do well to stop talking in circles about our misfortunes. There comes a time to put aside the negatives and refocus on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel calls us to be people of hope. The Gospel calls us to put our trust in God.

We choose to follow Jesus Christ.

¹ Movie, *The Wizard of Oz*, 1939.

² Attributed to Gracie Allen.