

June 20, 2021  
The Fourth Sunday After Pentecost, Year B  
The Rev. Paula Jefferson

### *Open Wide Your Hearts*

Today's readings present us with a similar theme: human suffering and God's engagement in our imperfect world. Fr Ron refers to this sort of reading as, "The Happy Christian's Guide to Suffering". Job, Mark's Gospel, and Paul ... each of these readings includes trauma, human response, and God's response.

St. Martin's Human Flourishing course concluded last week with a lecture from Dr. Danielle Tumminio. In her lecture, she suggested, "Trauma is an event that causes a *crisis of meaning* within the life of an individual or community".<sup>1</sup>

Job is the archetype of trauma. His wife and children have died. His home is in ruins. He has lost everything. Job is no longer a husband, a father, a business owner... And, as Danielle observed, a crisis of meaning often leads to a spiritual crisis. Job is questioning, "Where was God when I needed God"?

For answers, Job turned to his so-called friends. In their attempt to offer empathy, each of his friends offered an explanation for why bad things happen to good people...why, in their opinions, God has done what God has done. This kind of empathy is *disengaged* empathy... it doesn't afford Job an opportunity to express his own experience. It's disengaged from *his* reality. And, of course, none of their explanations wash with Job.

Finally, Job turns to God...demands that God explain God's self...on Job's terms.

God responds with two sweeping, beautiful speeches. The first speech begins with today's OT reading.

It is styled in the form of rhetorical questioning ... Job isn't expected to answer ... he cannot answer God's questions: where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Who determined its measurements? This is not a warm and cuddly conversation. God is setting a boundary. Job is human. God is not. Job is created. God is not.

### *Pause*

Jesus and the disciples are crossing a body of water. A windstorm whirls around them. The humans are frightened...they expect to die. And Jesus is sleeping.

When you've worked yourself into a good hysteria, there's nothing more infuriating than seeing someone else be oblivious to your concern. They wake Jesus and he calms the

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<sup>1</sup> The Rev. Danielle Tumminio Hansen, PhD

storm. Then he asks a question: *Why are you afraid?* The disciples do not answer this question. I wonder if Jesus meant it to be rhetorical?

*Pause*

Paul's letter to Corinth is hard. I wrestled with this all week, wondering what Paul meant for the Church in Corinth to "hear"... and what does Paul mean for us to "hear" today?

J B Phillips translated the New Testament into "Modern English"; this is a favorite resource when I'm wrestling with something. He titled this section of Corinthians: "*The Hard but Glorious life of God's ministers*". I guess that's his version of "Buckle up, buttercup".

The passage opens with Paul saying to the Church, "*As we work together with Christ, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain*". Phillips' rendering is a bit more blunt: *As co-operators with God himself we beg you, then, not to fail to use the grace of God which you have received.*<sup>2</sup> Note the past tense. In this interpretation, the point is much more dramatic. The church in Corinth, Job, the Disciples ...have already received God's Grace. And yet...Job challenges God's equity, the Disciples fear for their lives. And, Paul says to the Church in Corinth: "C'mon, Corinthians".

Paul is immersed in Grace—he feels it in and through every experience in his ministry. It is palpable to him. *His heart is open wide.*

*The world in front of the text:*

For a while, I served as a night time hospital chaplain. One night I was called to the Emergency Department; as I arrived, EMTs were bringing the patient into Trauma 1...the room prepared for the most extreme medical events. The patient was 12 years old. On his chest, there was a large, loud mechanical device artificially forcing his heart to work.

When you've worked in the hospital for a while, you recognize the machine. And, you know the situation is grave.

I entered Trauma 1 and quietly said a prayer for this child, the family en route to the hospital, and the medical team working to save this child's life.

When the parents arrived, we met and together entered Trauma 1. As precious minutes continued to pass with no response from the child's body, we prayed for God to save this child. When there was no more hope for the physical body, doctors turned off the machine. One by one, the medical team turned away from the child, with tears dripping from their chins.

Eventually, I went to the RN station...a busy place in an Emergency Department. The people who work in this space are special. They have the emotional and intellectual capacity to work methodically and analytically in crisis. And, they have the ability to move from one crisis to

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<sup>2</sup> JB Phillips The New Testament in Modern English, Revised Edition p377

another, and another, and another. That night, I sat in their charting area--one by one they came to talk to me about the child.

All of them knew him. His medical history brought him to the ED frequently. He had been there that very day...laughing, cracking them up with jokes. They understood the biological reasons his body died. Yet the loss of this child was painful. As they shared their stories, there were both smiles *and* tears.

This, I think, is what the front line of ministry looks like...Where we are attuned to the trauma and suffering of this world and the proximity of God's Kingdom...where we partner with God in the struggle for this world to be like God's Kingdom. This is the engagement to which Paul is calling us.

*Pause*

Yesterday was June 19<sup>th</sup>, the day Americans celebrate the end of slavery in the United States. People, who had no memory of freedom, were released from slavery into an imperfect America...where freedom rarely reflects equity. To this day, opportunity for people of my heritage differs from those whose ancestors were traded like commodities...whose stolen labor laid the foundation for America's economy.

People of color inherit more than their skin tone. They inherit the trauma of slavery, of unequal justice, of culture that quietly stacks the deck of opportunity against them.

As our Human Flourishing study group delved into allyship, we learned how we can partner with others ... and God ... to use our agency in this world for the benefit of marginalized people and communities.

*This, too, is front line ministry:*

Where we put our hand in the hand of another color.  
Where we begin to imagine what living in America is like for people who do not look like us.  
Where we recognize and touch suffering.  
Where we grow in honest relationship.  
Where we share tears and joy.  
Where we live into this broken world with the Grace God has given each of us.

Paul says to us, "Open Wide Your Hearts". I wonder he meant it rhetorically?