

## Faith in God in dark times

11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Feast of the Holy Trinity

Job 23:1 – 17



*1Then Job answered and said:  
2"Today also my complaint is bitter;  
my hand is heavy on account of my groaning.  
3Oh, that I knew where I might find him,  
that I might come even to his seat!  
4I would lay my case before him  
and fill my mouth with arguments.  
5I would know what he would answer me  
and understand what he would say to me.  
6Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power?  
No; he would pay attention to me.  
7There an upright man could argue with him,  
and I would be acquitted forever by my judge.  
8"Behold, I go forward, but he is not there,  
and backward, but I do not perceive him;  
9on the left hand when he is working, I do not behold him;  
he turns to the right hand, but I do not see him.  
10But he knows the way that I take;  
when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold.  
11My foot has held fast to his steps;  
I have kept his way and have not turned aside.  
12I have not departed from the commandment of his lips;  
I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my portion of food.  
13But he is unchangeable, and who can turn him back?  
What he desires, that he does.  
14For he will complete what he appoints for me,  
and many such things are in his mind.  
15Therefore I am terrified at his presence;  
when I consider, I am in dread of him.  
16God has made my heart faint;  
the Almighty has terrified me;  
17yet I am not silenced because of the darkness,  
nor because thick darkness covers my face.*

"O Lord, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar." (Psalm 139:1 – 2 ESV) King David confidently prayed these words. It is a gift to be able to place yourself confidently and with faith in God's arms. This is also what we hope for when we hear the words of the blessing each Sunday: "The Lord make his face shine upon you!" With this blessing, we hope that God would protect us during the week. We pray that His Holy Angel will be with us, that the evil foe may have no power over us.

However, what if God's face didn't shine, but appeared disappointed, bitter, or even mean? A common theological argument of the Jews at that time was that God always is and acts one hundred percent justly. So, if something bad happened to you, you must have done something to deserve it! Job's friends not only suspected, but knew, that Job had done something wrong somewhere. Otherwise, they would have had to say that God is unjust. Their arguments are above board according to the theology of those times. But they are arguments that are not based on experience or prayer. Theological arguments, which are made without the experience of suffering and prayer, are often questionable and unmerciful. I know that Job's story has a positive ending, but I think it's important that we put this positive outcome aside for now. This is important because we humans are all confronted with suffering and loss somewhere and at some point. Perhaps we also have similar questions to Job's, which are: Where is God in all of this?

“Behold, I go forward, but he is not there, and backward, but I do not perceive him; on the left hand when he is working, I do not behold him; he turns to the right hand, but I do not see him.” (Job 23:8 – 9 ESV)

Job looks in all directions and admits that God exists and acts, but this God doesn't seem to be acting in Job's favor. God is simply not accessible to Job—not in prayer, nor through good works or anything else.

When it comes to the question of suffering, I imagine four different types of people. There are those who are currently in the midst of suffering and, like Job, are asking themselves why God has abandoned them. Secondly, there are those who have never experienced such suffering as the feeling of being abandoned by God. Thirdly, there are those who don't know God at all and don't know what God has to do with them and their lives, nor do they seek Him. They therefore simply understand suffering as a coincidence. Finally, there are those who can remember how they once felt abandoned by God but have now found comfort.

Job is one of those who are in the midst of suffering. From one day to the next, everything was taken away from him. When multiple catastrophes strike in one day, it hits like a punch in the gut. We feel weak and helpless. When catastrophe strikes more than just our belongings, when it takes family members or affects our physical body, turning it into a festering heap of pain, we can scarcely recognize the friendly face of God. The only thing left for Job is his wife, who seems to stay alive for the sole purpose of tormenting Job and turning him away from God. There are still “Jobs” of various types today. The many wars around the world show us that the security we once felt prevails no more. Everything could be taken away from us. You can see discouragement, bitterness, and fear in many people's eyes. Many pray and go to church, and yet they don't feel God. We expect faith to comfort us and even bring joy, but who can be happy when all he holds dear is taken away? What if I drive too fast and have to pay a speeding ticket? What if I have an expensive payment for my heating bill? What if someone steals my bicycle? Then I don't feel very much like praising or thanking God. I wouldn't normally go all around the country giving thanks for the wonderful chastisement that God has given me. And there is more to be lost than merely a bicycle or a chunk of change, which puts a dent in our household budget. There are experiences of loss that cut right through our hearts and go much deeper. At some point, we all experience it: a loved one dies suddenly for no reason, you get bullied out of your work for no apparent reason, or your friends disappoint you deeply. The worst is when our very existence, life and limb are at stake. In such situations, we don't feel like praying. Even if we had a very strong desire to pray, it seems impossible. We can't even start to utter the Lord's Prayer. And so it was with Job. The way the pious Job deals with such suffering in these verses seems decidedly unchristian. There is no joy in the midst of suffering. No ifs, ands or buts. Only the feeling that God is unavailable.

Now for the next group of people: those who have not yet experienced suffering. Yes, there are people who seemingly never have to suffer. They only see the sunny side of life, receiving one blessing after another. Such people are understandably not very open to hearing the message of Job. We shouldn't begrudge those who are happy on the sunny side of life but rather allow them their happiness. Nevertheless, I can encourage those who have only experienced the happy side of life to listen to people on the other side. There are important messages to learn. Job's friends seem to have been on the happy side of life and therefore lacked experience and compassion. So, they couldn't learn anything from Job. They were on the sunny side of life and felt blessed by God. But is this assessment accurate? Aren't Job's friends downright delusional because they can only recognize God in happiness and not in suffering? It is a great gift when happy people can put themselves in the shoes of an unhappy person. It can even be helpful in preparing ourselves for the time when we might lose everything.

We come to the third group: those who don't connect suffering with God at all. They don't know God and therefore understand suffering as an accident. Such people cannot relate to Job's perplexity. The search for God is not an issue for such people. Instead, they seek spirituality within themselves and thus try to psychologically prepare themselves for suffering. Can we bring such people to God? Can we bring God to them?

Finally, we look at the fourth group: these are those who remember suffering and have found comfort. In Job, we encounter someone with nothing meaningful left in his life. Therefore, even his faith in God is under question. Perhaps only in retrospect, however, was he able to understand that he had believed even in rejecting God. It remains a vibrant, living and pure faith. Faith remains even when Job wants to reject that same faith. Precisely in this, it proves itself to be true faith. It is the mustard seed faith of which Jesus speaks. After everything has been lost, only God remains. How precious and wonderful He is. What a treasure are those, who stood on the edge of faith and, in the darkness of doubt, saw God's face. Time and again, I have seen and admired this. Sometimes I have also envied and been humbled by such people. People who came to the end of their lives on the ruins of their existence. Some of them were old... some sick and dying far too soon... but they all have these two things in common... They lost everything... and yet they did not stop praying and believing in God. At that moment, faith shines brightly and illuminates them and all those around them.

For all of us, happiness and suffering hang in the balance. Perhaps we each can remember being in all four of the above-mentioned situations. Now the question is, what happens next? Can it be that the story of our lives just comes to end like this? Does God simply let Job complain and then kill him? We see repeatedly in the Bible that God doesn't simply abandon people. He doesn't allow them to suffer forever and never see any meaning in life. Take the sacrifice of Isaac: God takes a long time to appear, and yet He intervenes and exchanges Isaac for a ram. It's ultimately the same with Job. At the very end, Job doesn't remain sitting on his pile of broken shards. At some point, the trial does come to an end, and he gets back everything he has lost. He even gets back more.

The outcome is only different for One. His name is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ also loses everything. Yet He remains on the cross. Stripped and naked, He cries out to God: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But Jesus is not delivered. It is not a fake death. He really comes to the end of his existence. He really dies. He is really laid woefully in the grave. He really loses everything and suffers death. There is one major difference in the death of our Lord Jesus Christ. His death is not a test to see what he could endure or how pious he could remain. No, "FOR US" is written all over His death. Jesus Christ didn't do all this to prove His piety to the world. He did it **for us**. He allowed himself to be pierced **for us**. He endured the suffering of the cross **for us**.

Surely, we will always have reasons to complain or grumble. There will always be times when we don't understand God's actions. Job is a role model for us. He is a role model because, despite losing everything, he defiantly clings to God. In the midst of his greatest suffering, he cries out: "I know that my Redeemer lives!" He doesn't do this because he knows his problems will be solved, but because he knows they won't. Job demonstrated unswerving faith in God. Jesus proved God's faithfulness to us definitively by truly dying for us. God showed His faithfulness by not only seemingly raising Jesus from the dead, but by truly raising Him. That's why I no longer have reason to fear, rather in all suffering, seek God, listen to His voice, learn from Him, and speak of Him, even unto death. Amen.