

Last week we heard the setup for Job's story: he was a very good man, and he lost everything so that God and the Satan could find out if he was pious because his life was good, or if he was pious because he loved God. When he lost everything, he tore his garments and put ashes on his head and said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I will return; the Lord gives and the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord." The next thing to happen is that three of his friends come to visit, and they sit with him for a week without saying anything. Then Job laments that he wishes he'd never been born, and his friend Eliphaz decides it's time to speak up.

You've given good advice to others, says Eliphaz, but now you're in trouble and you're impatient. Those who "plow iniquity and sow trouble" reap the same. God is just; therefore you must have done something for which you have not repented. Job speaks again, but he is not responding to Eliphaz; he is speaking to God: "Am I the Sea, or the Dragon, that you set a guard over me? . . . Let me alone, for my days are a breath. . . . Why have you made me your target? Why have I become a burden to you?"

Eliphaz is the voice of conventional wisdom. His starting assumption is that everything happens for a reason, and that God is always right. From there you can only conclude that Job's tribulations are justified because he has done something wrong. Eliphaz is ignoring the data: those who plow iniquity are *not* always the same people who reap trouble; every one of us can cite examples of that. And Job's anguish is not just because of his suffering but because it doesn't make sense to him: he can't think of anything he did wrong recently that would account for this reversal

of fortune.

Lots of us have been Eliphaz a time or two. He means well, and coming to sit with Job in silence for a week is no small thing. I give him points for showing up and wanting to help. That sitting in silence was good, too. There's lots of awkwardness in tragedy; if you don't have a direct role like offering ointment for the boils or dealing with the insurance adjuster about the collapsed houses, it's hard to know how to be comforting. We always want to help, but being present and silent seems awkward. Maybe it's not; maybe if we were all more comfortable with silence we would be able to bring some consolation without requiring that we talk about something when nobody really feels like talking or has anything to say.

Eliphaz's mistake, probably, is in trying to explain why this has happened. He probably should have stuck with silence, but he feels compelled to address Job's pain by changing Job's incorrect ideas about himself and God. He wants to help, but it's not helpful.

I recently read an essay by a doctor, Rachel Naomi Remen, who says that there are three ways of looking at life: helping, fixing, and serving. When you help, you see life as weak. Eliphaz sees Job as weak, needing instruction or reminders of appropriate ways to frame life with God. When you fix, you see life as broken. When you serve, you see life as whole. Fixing and helping create distance; they may be the work of the ego. However, we cannot serve at a distance. We can only serve that to which we are profoundly connected. She says, "Service rests on the premise that the nature of life is sacred, that life is a holy mystery which has an unknown purpose. When we serve, we know that we belong to life and to that purpose."

She tells about a colleague of hers, Henry, who was an emergency room physician. A woman came in about to give birth, and Henry realized that her OB would not make it, so he prepared to deliver the baby, something he'd done many times. The little girl was born, and Henry was suctioning out her mouth and nose, when the baby opened her eyes and looked directly at him.

In that instant, Harry stepped past all of his training and realized a very simple thing: that he was the first human being this baby girl had ever seen. He felt his heart go out to her in welcome from all people everywhere, and tears came to his eyes.

Harry has delivered hundreds of babies, and has always enjoyed the excitement of making rapid decisions and testing his own competency. But he says that he had never let himself experience the meaning of what he was doing before, or recognize what he was serving with his expertise.

He felt that in a sense, this was the first baby he'd ever delivered. He had always been present as an expert, but never until now as a human being, deeply connected to another. He had been helping, and sometimes fixing, during deliveries, but this time he served: he saw the wholeness of the person, not her need or her helplessness.

Remen says that when we serve, we strengthen the other, perhaps in such a way that they may be able to see their own wholeness. She recalls as a young woman she had to have a good bit of her colon removed because of Crohn's Disease, and she had an ileostomy, a plastic appliance into which her bowel opens. She writes,

While this surgery had given me back much of my vitality, the appliance and the profound change in my body made me feel hopelessly different, permanently shut out of the world of femininity and elegance. At the beginning, before I could change my appliance myself, it was changed for me by nurse specialists called enterostomal therapists. These white-

coated experts were women my own age. They would enter my hospital room, put on an apron, a mask and gloves, and then remove and replace my appliance. The task completed, they would strip off all their protective clothing. Then they would carefully wash their hands. This elaborate ritual made it harder for me. I felt shamed.

One day a woman she had not met came to do this task. This woman was dressed as if for dinner, with a silk dress, stockings and heels. She washed her hands *before* touching Remen, and very simply and naturally changed the appliance without putting on gloves. Her hands were well-cared for, with pale pink nail polish and a gold ring. Remen says,

At first, I was stunned by this break in professional procedure. But as she laughed and spoke with me in the most ordinary and easy way, I suddenly felt a great wave of unsuspected strength come up from someplace deep in me, and I knew without the slightest doubt that I could do this. I could find a way. It was going to be all right.

I doubt that she ever knew what her willingness to touch me in such a natural way meant to me. In ten minutes she not only tended my body, but healed my wounds. What is most professional is not always what best serves and strengthens the wholeness in others. Fixing and helping create a distance between people, an experience of difference. We cannot serve at a distance. We can only serve that to which we are profoundly connected, that which we are willing to touch. Fixing and helping are strategies to repair life. We serve life not because it is broken but because it is holy.

What Job is undergoing is part of life, terrifying because it can happen to any of us, any time. With all the good will in the world, Eliphaz cannot fix it for him, and maybe “fixing” is the wrong word anyway, because it is part of life. I’m very taken with that line, “We serve life not because it is broken but because it is holy.” I may have mentioned that the book of Job is really long—42 chapters—and today I think it’s that long because it’s *Job’s* life, *Job’s* tragedy, *Job’s* lamentation, and that’s just how long it takes him to have this confrontation with God. Eliphaz and the other

friends can't shorten it by giving Job a correct explanation; he has to explain in full exactly how he feels, enumerate his complaints, cry out to God in every way he can think of, because his life is holy and big. Not condensable. Worth 42 chapters.

The gospel lesson that the Narrative Lectionary contains is a very short statement about the Kingdom of God. Jesus says, 'It is not coming with things that can be observed, nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" For in fact the kingdom of God is among you.' We discover the kingdom of God when we connect with others, touching that to which we are profoundly connected, in mystery, surrender, and awe.

Let us pray:

Gracious and mysterious God, we pray that we may resist anxiety and endure awkwardness. Let us not seek to be experts who take over, but companions who touch one another with compassion, respect, and blessing. Amen.