



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Guns and Job and St. Francis

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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I am tired of writing sermons for Sunday mornings in the aftermath of mass killings. I am alarmed that we have begun to accept them as commonplace. But I will try, one more time to wrestle with the question, "where is God in this story?" Today I have Job and St. Francis as my guides.

The story of Job provides a very necessary counterpoint to much of the wisdom literature in the Bible. Earlier this summer, we had readings from the Book of Proverbs, that compendium of wisdom that hints at a correlation of doing good and getting good in return. If one is wise and follows God's teachings, everything will be fine. Plant good seeds, you get good crops. That sort of thing. Well, wise people can look at the world and realize that that is not always the case. Job stands as the example of the opposite. Horrible things happen to good people, people who work hard to live good lives, to be honest and kind and generous. And then something breaks into their lives and devastates. All too often the questions asked follow the familiar path of trying to find a reason. Job's friends and even his wife challenge the goodness of his life and look for whatever it was that brought such calamity on him. They ask him, "what did you do to deserve this?" "Did you anger God in some way?" I think that that is an easier way to push through such bad times than to consider that Job's run of bad luck had nothing to do with anything that he did. We will hear Job's saga throughout the month of October. It is our opportunity to consider some of life's big questions. There are two big questions asked in Job's story, one on earth and one in heaven. "Why do the innocent suffer?" and "is there such a thing as "disinterested" faith - or faith that is not correlated to an outcome" Is it possible to exercise one's faith in such a way that it is independent of what happens in our lives? Can we hold on to our faith if someone we love is shot in school or church? Job answers his wife's query with a question of his own, "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?"

So much of our faith tradition really wants to connect God and the good things that happen. We don't want to go to that other place. Must we connect God and our tragedies as well?" That possibility deserves a more thoughtful answer than, "God has a plan."

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There is another player on the field of Job's story - the story of all of our lives. And that is the gift of free will that is our birthright as human beings on this earthly journey. It's the one thing we cannot leave home without. We cannot forget it or leave it somewhere. I've had an idea of a way to experience Job's story and that is to consider that what God gives us, first of all, is life. God does not give a good life to some and a hard life to others. God gives us life which encompasses all of the human experience. It's up to us to pursue God's vision as we respond to what comes our way.

This is where St. Francis comes in. Today is his day. We do him a disservice when we relegate him to the garden as best friend to flowers and furry creatures. His life was dedicated to being best friends with all of creation, particularly those who are having a bad life experience. He proposed and challenged all of us to use our free to change the world around us and to never let someone who suffers do so in isolation. His solidarity with the poor and the oppressed is one of the purest expressions of Christianity that we have. As Francis was dying, in his bed with a fever, his companions wanted to build a fire to keep him warm. Francis stopped them saying that he was not willing to be warmed by a fire if there were anyone on earth who did not also have such a luxury. He shivered in his bed in solidarity with all who suffered.

In the four weeks that we read Job, we will not hear of the responses of his friends to his plight. Job's friends are actually models of how we should friend one another. They find him in the ash heap - the garbage dump and they sit with him. They actually do more than that, they condole with him - the word from which we get condolence. It means to enter into suffering with someone. They do so by a kind of ritual rocking back and forth and nodding the head. Job scholar Gerry Janzen described it, "Theirs is a condolence so deeply felt as to be inarticulate, expressible only through these bodily movements by which one undergoes sympathetically the embodied sufferings of another." Throughout the dialogues that follow, these friends serve as Job's backboard against which he hits his evolving thoughts. They sit rocking, representing the consistent presence of the faith that Job had before all of this happened to him so that he does not lose touch with it.

Now because Job is metaphoric story written to wrestle with such thorny problems, we don't get the St. Francis response which is to actually do something about the suffering in the world. If this were a case study on how to help change someone's dire circumstances, Job's friends might have brought him some medical care and provided him with a place to stay that wasn't the ash heap. It's great to be willing to sit in the ashes with someone, but it is even better help to change a circumstance. That is where our free will comes in.

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The challenge for us, in this week of another shooting spree is to not somehow identify ourselves with Job. We are not innocents to whom these violent things just keep happening. This culture is of our own making - it is the end result of a toxic festival of an individualistic interpretation of free will, fed with super-sized helpings of fear and suspicion. Those who have died in mass shootings are innocents visited by this malevolence, but make no mistake, we as a country are not. We have created this and continue to do nothing to create anything else. Change requires courage and sacrifice but we can't even seem to have the conversation.

We pretend that it is unavoidable, partly because one solution will not suffice. We need multiple concurrent solutions. We need to attend to the "well-regulated" clause of the 2nd amendment. There is plenty of data available that regulation does reduce gun deaths. We need more resources for mental health services. We need to pay attention to those who fit the profile of most of these mass shooters, white males in their 20s with despair and anger issues and access to firepower. We need to begin to resist the glorification of violence. None of this is easy. It requires a focused campaign of our free will - to commit ourselves to actions that will allow the emergence of the world that Jesus described - that Jesus is.

So, where is God in the story of Oregon this week? Do we simply surrender and give up on God, assuming that God is an illusion unsupported by what we have witnessed, because after all, what kind of a God does or allows this? I truly believe that God is most present in the ashes of Oregon, grieving deeply. I am tired of this, but not so tired as to lose hope. I know the stuff of which we are made; I know what we are capable of achieving. I know that Jesus' sacrificial love and St. Francis' radical justice are the answer for a culture that has lost its way. I just pray that we will wake up to that before too many more lives are lost. Please take your prayer book and turn to page _____. Whether Francis wrote it or not, let's pray it together.

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