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Kurt Vonnegut is quoted as saying, “People say there are no atheists in foxholes. A lot of people think this is a good argument against atheism. Personally, I think it's a much better argument against foxholes.” That thought might offer a good start for us as we meditate on the question of a good God and suffering, an underlying theme of today’s readings. Before studying today’s selection from the Book of Job, it’s good to recall what brought God to speak to him in the first place.

What was going on in Job’s life was more than just a storm; it was a tragedy. He was an upright, faithful man who felt blessed with great fortune. Then the devil bet against his goodness, wagering that Job’s faith would prove unequal to the loss of the good life. As Job’s circumstances got progressively worse, “friendly theologians” tried to help him assume the blame for the evil that befell him. Certain that they understood the ways of God, they kept reminding him that good is rewarded and evil brings punishment, so it was time for him to repent. Job would have nothing of it. He knew he didn’t deserve his misfortune, so he called on God to justify the turn of events.

The disciples onboard the rocking boat with Jesus had a belief system similar to that of Job and his so-called friends: Jesus should have been their safety net. Thus, the storm’s increasing hostility was matched by their growing fear and frustration with

an unresponsive Jesus. Where was God when everything was going wrong?

Both of these readings pose that question to realign our faith. Job's God doesn't stoop to the level of the theologians by defending divine justice in human terms. Jesus, fully awake to all that is happening, ignores the disciples' accusation that he doesn't care about them, and after overpowering the storm, he questions their lack of faith.

The questionable faith depicted in both of these readings rests on the assumption that God's duty is to provide health and wealth to everyone who deserves it. That theology is very handy for the fortunate few of our world; it plays the double role of affirming the idea that their well-being is proof of their worthiness, while simultaneously getting them off the hook of responsibility for the masses of people who suffer. It also covers the poor, the victims, the innocent casualties of war and, yes, even martyrs, with a robe of culpability for their own fate.

The theology that paints faith like a good insurance policy is foxhole theology, the kind of religion the German theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke of when he wrote:

Men go to God when they are sore bestead,  
pray to him for succor ...

all men do so,

Christian and unbelieving.

But Bonhoeffer held Christians to a different standard. The second verse of this poem says:

Men go to God when He is sore bestead,

find Him poor and scorned ...

whelmed under the weight of the wicked ...

Christians stand by God in His hour of grieving.

In that poem from his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Bonhoeffer suggests that while need can bring people to their knees, Christian faith leads people beyond self-

concern to recognize and respond to God's presence in everyone in need.

Our reading from Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians proclaims that Bonhoeffer's approach is possible because we are part of a new creation in Christ. Paul is utterly convinced that Christ's life in us changes everything so much that Christ's love actually "impels us" to live no longer for ourselves but for Christ. Paul is trying to point out that because we are one with Christ, death can harm us no more than it can harm Christ. Note, Paul didn't say we won't suffer and eventually die, but suffering takes on a new meaning.

Now we are talking about faith that goes beyond foxholes and insurance policies. This is the faith Jesus hoped to find in his disciples as they went through the storm. Pope Francis teaches that while we do not always understand it, faith provides an "interior certainty, a conviction that God can act in every situation." Faith, he says, "means believing in God, believing that he truly loves us, that he is alive, that he is mysteriously capable of intervening, that he does not abandon us and that he brings good out of evil by his power and his infinite creativity." Francis goes on to say that the fruitfulness of that sort of faith is "often invisible, elusive and unquantifiable. We can know quite well that our lives will be fruitful, without claiming to know how, or where, or when" ("The Joy of the Gospel" 278).

Today's readings invite us to evaluate our faith, asking not what it promises us, but to what it impels us.

### **Job 38:1, 8-11**

God's word to Job was precipitated by Job's plea: "Let the Almighty answer me!" (31:35). Job, a man once unusually blessed, had lost everything, and his unhelpful theologian friends insisted that his misery had to be punishment for some hidden sin. For the theorists who surrounded Job, there was but one explanation: A just God rewards good and punishes evil; the degree of a person's prosperity is a sign of their personal goodness and grace. It was a popular hypothesis, a theology that upheld the privilege of the powerful and relieved them of much responsibility for the unfortunate because no one should interfere with God's design — or, as some quote, "The poor will be always with us." The trouble was that Job knew the simplistic theology of recompense was false.

Job was a truly just man who had lost everything. He knew not why, and no human answer justified his lot. He did know, as only a genuinely honest and humble person

can, that he had done nothing to deserve his fate. His only recourse was to call God to account. If God could not answer him, then God was not the answer to anything and life was pathetically meaningless.

God finally replied to Job, responding to his anguish but not resolving his implicit accusation of injustice.

Ignoring everyone but Job himself, God challenged him to prepare for the interrogation that would silence, if not answer, his questions. It was not a matter of divine self-defense, but of revelation. God asked Job who he thought he was, what equipped him to reproach his maker? In essence, God's response to Job was: "I am the Creator, you are not." That statement actually goes to the heart of Judaism and reflects the Jewish daily creed, the *Shema*, which says, "Hear, O Israel, The Lord is our God, the Lord alone."

Job didn't receive an answer to his cry. But God assured him that he was not alone, nor was he in charge of explaining the universe. God's response reflects the last two verses of Psalm 46: "Be still and know that I am God, I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted on earth. The Lord of Hosts is with us, our stronghold is the God of Jacob."

There are some questions for which human answers will always be inadequate. They destroy faith only when we assume we can demand that God respond on our terms, when we refuse to admit, "The Lord is our God, the Lord alone."

## **2 Cor 5:14-17**

There is an interesting connection between our first reading and this selection from 2 Corinthians. God's answer to Job's anguish was simply, "I am God." Paul begins this selection by talking about Christ's love as the core reality of our life. When Job heard God's word, his response was to take a step back, to recognize human frailty and limitation in the face of God's greatness. Paul has something else in mind. Job stood in awe, in holy terror, before the Divine. Paul knows and appreciates such wondrous "fear of the Lord," but he chooses to focus on the intimate identification between Christ and believers, an identification that springs from Christ's love.

Paul calls his community to a new way of life based on the conviction that Christ's death had real and practical effects on each of them. He is convinced that what happened to Christ happened to them, as well. It can be difficult for us to

understand the collective identity understood by Paul's culture, but perhaps we get a glimpse of it through our experiences of patriotism or team spirit. Even in a culture as imbued as ours with individualism, we recognize our part in the collective identity of the nation when "we" take a stand by confronting terrorism or rescuing hostages. For some, sports offers a much more intense collective experience when thousands of people who have never stepped on a professional playing field rejoice wildly and proclaim, "We won!" The collective identification created through patriotism or team spirit is but a shadow of what Paul is talking about when he says, "One died for all ... therefore all have died." Paul knows that believers are identified with Christ; they live "in Christ" so that, like Paul, they can say, "I live no longer I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

Paul uses a variety of expressions to bring his idea home to the Corinthians. When he refers to coming to conviction about Christ, he is talking about a combination of grace and personal decision. A conviction is a decision taken on the basis of what one has seen. Faith in Christ is both a divine gift and a human response.

For Paul, the conviction of faith has ramifications in every aspect of life. Those who believe now have a new trajectory — they live no longer for themselves, but for Christ. Lest that be an empty phrase, Paul points out practical implications. Those who are in Christ cultivate a new perception of everyone else as part of God's good creation. Their conviction about the new creation is the light by which they now see everyone and everything. But that new mode of perception is not a law imposed on them or an ideal to achieve through self-control. Their new life and perception are a result of the grace of knowing the love of Christ. Thus, the essential task of Christian life is to come more and more into contact with Christ's love. The rest will follow.

### **Mark 4:35-41**

This account of Jesus calming the storm at sea demonstrates Mark's unique ability to tell a succinct and profound story. We will understand it better by standing alongside Mark's original audience as we hear it. Mark wrote for a community that was in distress because Christ's second coming had not yet occurred, and instead of the great and final victory of God, they were undergoing persecution and witnessing the martyrdom of their leaders. There was also the great struggle of combining Jews and gentiles in the new Christian community. In Mark's day, Christian life was far from calm.

As Mark sets this scene, Jesus has been preaching in parables and explaining the details to his disciples. Then he makes the odd suggestion that he and the in-group cross over to foreign territory. We don't hear any reaction from the disciples, but the trip turned out to be far more harrowing than they expected. While the hurricane-like storm threatened to engulf them, most disturbing of all was the fact that Jesus, far from sharing their distress, was peacefully napping. With a reproachful tone that would do the psalmists proud, they awakened him with the accusation that their safety meant nothing to him.

Jesus made no reply to their indictment. Instead, using the language of exorcism, he "rebuked" the storm and ordered the waves to settle down. Wind and water immediately obeyed his command. Seeing that, the disciples were more frightened by his power than they had been by the storm itself. They must have been hoping that he would lend a hand, or at least be conscious with them as they breathed their last. But he addressed the storm itself. That shifted their attention from themselves and the boat to him.

Once he had controlled the tempest, Jesus took up his own reproach. He had just spent a day telling parables about how the word of God could grow in them. He had spoken of the reign of God as a seed that flourishes without anyone understanding how; had described God's reign as the tiniest of seeds that grows almost uncontrollably, and now he must have been exasperated. The disciples accused him of not being concerned about them, while he chided them for failing to have faith in the God whose reign was appearing in their midst.

We ought not be too hard on the disciples. With good reason, they wanted some sign that Jesus was with them in their terrifying crossing. What they didn't expect was a show of care that revealed him to be as much at one with the Creator as with creation. Their question "Who then is this?" could not have been more genuine, and no other question could have provided more fertile ground for faith. They were overwhelmed and yet willing to venture further in their understanding.

Today's readings invite us to stand with Job and the disciples, asking, "Who is our God?"

Job's questioning led to an encounter in which he was reminded that God is greater than the human capacity to understand, much less question. The disciples' experience with Jesus led them toward understanding that the God of creation was closer to them than they could have hoped or imagined. Paul then took the next

obvious step, reminding us and the Corinthians that in Christ, we have become a new creation.

## **Planning: 12th Sunday in OrdinaryTime**

By: Lawrence Mick

As we noted in last week's column, the readings today suggest a continued focus on care of the environment. In the first reading, God makes it clear to Job that it is God who established creation and, thus, God who is in charge of it. We humans are not the ultimate masters of creation. The responsorial psalm focuses on the sea and storms, as does the Gospel selection, and invites us to acknowledge "the works of the Lord and his wonders in the abyss." The second reading speaks of a new creation, which does not mean that the original creation is dispensable. The new creation is the original creation transformed. The Gospel shows Jesus as the master of creation, reminding us again that the whole universe belongs to God.

The readings' focus on the sea might suggest a particular focus on the gift of water today, perhaps along with the threat of sea-level rise resulting from global warming and the challenges of the depletion of water reserves around the world. Preachers and planners might highlight this positive/negative dynamic, which is also inherent in the basic symbolism of water. Water is absolutely essential for life, yet too much water can also bring death and destruction. Thus, in baptism, water can symbolize sharing in Christ's death and resurrection, filling a watery tomb that is also a womb for rebirth.

Preachers and planners both could link concern for safe, clean water with our use of water in baptism. Look for music that speaks of water and its importance for life. Consider photos of watercourses and lakes, perhaps in the entryways, to catch people's attention as they gather.

Beyond what happens in worship, this would be a good day to encourage water conservation both in the parish facilities and in parishioners' homes. Do you have a group in the parish working on environmental issues? They might prepare handouts that suggest various ways to conserve water and protect water sources.

## **Prayers: 12th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

By: Joan DeMerchant

## **Introduction**

My friends, is there anyone here who has never been afraid? Who has never experienced chaos or wondered who's in control of things? Today's readings speak to these ancient feelings of powerlessness. We may know more about the vast universe and nature's weather patterns, but we are stopped in our tracks by life's storms and the chaos they can bring. We have to rely on someone greater than ourselves to get us through the storms. In today's Gospel, Jesus is the voice of power spoken into the chaos at sea. And it is his voice that speaks calm into the chaos that invades our lives. Today we are reminded that only God is in control.

## **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, You make us a new creation in you: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, You calmed the storm at sea: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, You teach us to not be afraid: Lord, have mercy.

## **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** My friends, we present now our many needs and concerns to God, whose love is everlasting.

**Minister** For the church, that it may speak the voice of Christ wherever there is chaos ... we pray,

- For peace, justice and civility in a world where there is often chaos in politics, religion, the environment and the economy ... we pray,
- For those who struggle with chaos, especially the poor and marginalized and those living in violence or war ... we pray,
- For those who work to bring calm to others: for parents and caretakers; counselors and confessors; social workers and teachers, mediators and diplomats ... we pray,
- For all fathers and stepfathers; grandfathers and godfathers; for all men who serve and nurture young people ... for their strength and tenderness, courage and wisdom, generosity and faithfulness ... we pray,
- For those celebrating the sacrament of marriage this month, and for those whose marriages need strengthening ... we pray,



- For the sick, the dying and the grieving; and for those who have died ... (*names*) ... we pray,

**Presider** God of the universe, we are often called to give courage and strength to others when we ourselves feel powerless and afraid. Help us to remember that our strength is in you, the source of all power. We ask these things in the name of your Son, Jesus, who rebuked the wind and calmed the storm at sea. Amen.

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