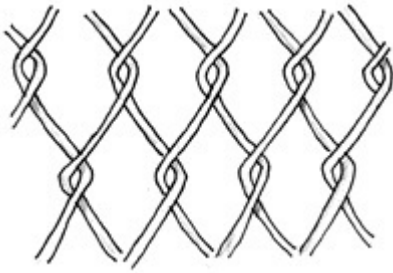


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by Pat Marrin

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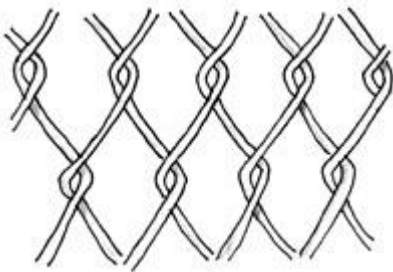
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“She was moved with pity for him” (Exod 2:6).

The story of the Exodus, the founding event of the people of Israel, begins with an act of compassion. The daughter of Pharaoh is preparing to bathe in the Nile when she hears the cry of a child. Her handmaids bring her a basket floating in the water, and inside is a baby. She is moved with pity, and thus begins the ancient tale of

Moses, the liberator of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt.

The scene is repeated when another cry is heard, this time from the enslaved people, and it is God who hears it and responds. God recalls the covenant He made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and “he took heed of the plight of Israel” (Exod 2:25). Compassion is the driving force within salvation history. Mercy is God’s name.

Before the idea of justice can form in the human mind, pity moves the human heart. It is spontaneous and instinctive. We are moved before we have a chance to think about it. At the very core of our human nature is the capacity to feel the suffering of another as our own. Without this empathy we are less than human.

The Gospels report often that Jesus was moved to pity. The Greek verb used to convey this is *spagchnizomai*, which means a twisting of the bowels, a gut-wrenching feeling. It is the pity of a mother for her own child. Jesus responds with pity to the widow of Nain at the funeral of her son, to the hungry crowds in the wilderness, at the death of Lazarus, his friend. He breaks down and weeps over the city of Jerusalem for its failure to head off the coming disaster.

Today’s Gospel shows us Jesus grieving over the cities where his ministry began with such promise. His grief is edged with frustration, even anger, like the anger he unleashed on the Pharisees for closing their hearts to God’s grace and preventing others from receiving its promises. Unlike so much Christian art and in movies, the real Jesus shows the full range of human emotion. There is a time for joy and gentleness, but also for indignation and tears.

The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Jesus came to show us the face of God, which burns with divine mercy that never ceases and has no limit. As disciples we are called not just to hear the cry of the poor, but to enter the cause of it with empathy, to go beyond sadness to a determination to stop indifference, cruelty and neglect.

Like the God of the Exodus, we are called to heed the plight of those who are suffering. Mercy is the beginning, middle and end of the story of salvation, the essence of Christian faith. It is also the one sure measure of our humanity.

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