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"Job's Despair" (1825-26) by William Blake (Metropolitan Museum of Art)



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This February, we may be feeling bleaker than normal during midwinter. It's been a year since we saw our first U.S. death from COVID-19. A few weeks later, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warned that the pandemic could have serious effects on our country.

Waiting for immunizations, our world now alternates between full lockdown and the relative freedom of staying masked and distant. For the first time in the memory of the living, the whole world shares a motive for echoing Job's lament at the miserable drudgery of unchanging days and restless nights — and, yes, even his desolation at the loss of innocent lives in irrational tragedy.

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Job 7:1-4, 6-7

Psalm 147

1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23

Mark 1:29-39

Clichés venerate the patience of Job. In reality, Job mourned boisterously, voicing loud protests and demanding answers from God. His greatest demonstration of patience may have been his refusal to retaliate against the so-called friends who plied him with shallow explanations and pious platitudes when what he needed was someone to listen to his perspective and share his grief.

Reading Job's whole story, we learn that God did not offer any self-defense or explain the suffering of the innocent. Job had believed in a theology of reward and punishment: Goodness is well-compensated; evil brings suffering and misfortune. Judged from that perspective, Job appeared to be among the worst of the worst. But he knew that wasn't true. Therefore, he dared protest and accuse God of injustice.

While Job presented his case, God simply listened. When God finally spoke, it was to remind Job of whom he was indicting. Leading him to judge himself, God dared Job to defend his grounds for protest. Had he been there at the creation of the world? Had he sent the rains to make the earth fertile? Did he keep motherly watch over the birth of mountain goats or teach the eagle to fly?

After his encounter with the living God who keeps loving vigil over all creation, Job resolved his own lament saying, "By hearsay I had heard of you, but now my eye has seen you." He had been moved from a strict law-and-order orientation to an open-ended relationship with God.

As Peruvian theologian and Dominican priest Gustavo Gutiérrez explains, Job's encounter with God's gratuitous love made all the difference. When he realized that everything he ever had was a gift, Job comprehended that no one can earn blessing, nor even claim the right to exist. His life, whether easy or arduous, was something he could never deserve, but which he could decide to spend well or poorly.

Job offers a thought-provoking complement to Mark's depiction of Jesus' early ministry. While we meet Job reeling in utterly reasonable sadness, the Gospel introduces Jesus as an unstoppable healer who inaugurated his ministry by healing Peter's mother-in-law or *penthera*. Since everyone deserves her own name, we'll call her Penny.

When we think of the people healed by Jesus, Penny is rarely the first to come to mind. Unlike Job, the wealthy, well-known patriarch, Penny seems insignificant — just an elder with a fever — until Mark tells her story and Penny becomes the prototype of the saved.

We don't know if she cried out, was delirious, or was simply hiding away in a corner when Peter came home with friends. We do know that when "they" told Jesus about her, all his attention turned to her. He took Penny's hand and raised her up.

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Mark adds that as soon as the fever left, Penny began to serve them. Mark's word for her service is *diakoneo*, the source of our word *deacon*. Thus, although the office of deacon was not yet established, Penny was the first Gospel character to fill the role.

Penny went Job one further. Job came around to revere God. Penny, like the women of Mark 15:41, *ministered* to Jesus and his companions. In Mark's Gospel, the *diakoneo* word for service is used only of Jesus (Mark 10:45), Penny and those women.

Paul's message to the Corinthians helps us integrate today's readings. Job's experience transformed his faith from tit-for-tat to a personal relationship. Paul declares that knowing Christ inevitably makes one a Christlike slave for the Gospel. From a Pauline perspective, Job came to love God; Penny found herself acting like God.

Job and Penny each offer us vital perspectives for dealing with the crises of our time. Job shows us how to pray with gut-wrenching honesty to the God who always watches over us. Penny shows us how encounters with God lead us into service.

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