

The Hard Questions

I saw an image on the internet last week that was absolutely the most heart-breaking picture I have ever seen. It was so devastating, I won't try to describe it beyond saying it was of a small boy in a hospital saying goodbye to his terminally ill little sister.

It was a bad week for images, for evidence that living in God's creation can be unbearably cruel.

If you have ever experienced the cruelty of life.

If you have ever asked, "Why did God let that happen?"

If you have ever prayed hard for something you *desperately* wanted, and did not get it.

If you have ever asked, "Where is God in this?" Then the book of Job is written for you.

Today's readings deal with the two extremes of living in this fascinating, puzzling, wonderful, and sometimes tragic world of God's creation. The disconnect between what God *can* do and what God *will* do puts enormous strain on our relationship with God. So much strain that sometimes both God and humans wonder if they even know who the other is.

Both readings today contain the same question: "Who is this?" God asks that question about Job, and centuries later, the disciples ask the same thing about Jesus. They ask it for the same reason. Because there has been a breakdown in communication. They thought it was clear what their relationship was. They made some assumptions, but now as dramatic events unfold, they're not so certain.

Truth is not always what we assume. What we know of the facts may be true and yet we find ourselves jumping to conclusions that turn out to be way off the mark. We think we have all the information we need, when we don't.

This reality lies at the heart of one of the oldest and most wrenching dilemmas in all of religion: in a world in which a just and merciful God reigns supreme, why do bad things happen to good people?

The ancient Greeks were famous for asking that question. Long before them, another group of people were probing far deeper than the Greeks did.

The Hebrew writers were brutally honest. They lived up to their name of *Israel*: the people who wrestle with God. They wanted to find out who God really is and so they found the courage to stand up to God and ask honest questions, without either the bitter skepticism of the Greeks or the false piety of the overtly religious.

They looked at the long-cherished religious belief that God rewards good and punishes evil, and dared to ask the hard question: Under that system, can there really be any such thing as true love of God?

If God rewards those who do what God wants, and deals out suffering to those who don't, then being good is not a virtue—it's just smart business. In fact, there is no such thing as virtue—no such thing as love for God. Even the most devout person obeys God strictly for their own selfish gain.

That led to the question: which are we going to give up: our view of the old system of divine reward and punishment, or a true relationship with God?

To explore this question, Job invites us to imagine a man from a place no one has ever heard of, who was impossibly rich, and impossibly righteous who suffers impossibly bad luck. More evil happens to him in 24 hours than has happened to all of Eau Claire combined in the past century. All of his children all die, his fortune evaporates; everything he has built turns to ashes, and his body is subjected to torture.

At first Job stoically accepts the horrific tragedies that befall him as just part of the cost of doing business with God. God is great. God is not only all-powerful, but also mysterious and unpredictable. You don't argue with God. You gotta take the bad with the good in life.

But as his misfortunes mount beyond the point that any human being could endure, he starts to wonder about God. What is happening to him is a terrible injustice; he does not deserve this agony and suffering. If God allows such glaring injustice in the world, what does that say about God?

There seem to be only two possible answers: if God is all-powerful, then God cannot be loving and just. If God is loving and just, then God must not be all-powerful.

Like so many religious folks, Job's friends refuse to go there. They trot out their standard moralistic doctrine: God is loving and just AND all-powerful. God gives people only what they deserve. Therefore all the bad that befalls Job has to be Job's fault.

But the story purposely sets up Job as an incredibly good man just to stop anyone who wants to take that easy way out. The reader already knows that there is no way the

best person in the history of the world deserves the worst fate of anyone in the history of the world.

That leads Job to a terrifying conclusion: If the all-powerful Creator of the universe can let such terrible things happen to him, God must not be compassionate or just.

Job does not say that in anger. Remember, he is the most wonderfully good and obedient man. He does not deny that God has the right and the power to do whatever God wants. He does not even waver in his conviction that God is deserving of praise and worship. He just wishes God were not so uncaring.

But when Job comes to this seemingly logical conclusion, God roars to life. A voice out of a whirlwind slams Job up against the wall and demands: *Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge?*

We discover as we listen to God's speech that God has no quarrel with the facts as Job sees them. God says that Job was right and his friends were wrong: In no way does Job deserve what has happened to him. Yes, bad things do happen to good people.

What God will not stand for is the conclusion Job draws from this, that God is uncaring and unfair. "Who is this person whom I have loved so dearly who dares call me unjust and unloving?!" God demands.

I thought we knew each other. I thought you understood that you are my beloved child. And yet it appears you know nothing about me! Compassion and justice pretty much define exactly who I am, and you ought to know that.

Which leaves Job struggling like the rest of us with the question we started with: If Almighty God is compassionate and just, why does God allow good people to suffer? In other words, he's back to square one: and he's wondering who is this God, really?

The disciples in our Gospel reading are driven to ask that same question. They have been living as close to Jesus as anyone will ever get. They are the ultimate religious insiders. They should know Jesus better than anyone. And yet as the events around the storm play out, they are completely blindsided.

They discover they really don't know who this person is who calmed the storm. So they ask each other, "Who is this Jesus who can do such powerful, wonderful acts?"

Taken together, the two readings force us to ask, who is this God who can do such powerful, wonderful acts, and yet allows such evil to befall good people?

God's speech in Job moves on to address that question. The answer is all around you. It is everywhere you look. The answer is tied up in boundaries.

Do you know who made the boundaries of the universe, Job? God asks.

You did, squeaks Job.

That's right, thunders God. *Do you know why I made boundaries? I set boundaries because nothing meaningful comes out of chaos, and I wanted something meaningful to come out of this world that I made.*

I created order out of chaos, and order means setting boundaries. So I made the bars and the doors for the sea, and said, "Thus far you shall come and no farther." I set boundaries for the stars and determined their measurements. I set boundaries for the universe.

Setting boundaries means there are things inside and outside the boundaries. Setting boundaries means are things you can and cannot do. There are things, for example, that humans cannot do because of the boundary of mortality. The boundaries of physics make it impossible for us to be in two places at once.

Therein lies the answer to Job's dilemma: In order to make life meaningful, God had to set boundaries, and God set those boundaries in such a way that *there are things God cannot do.*

That conclusion rubs Christians the wrong way. Aren't all things possible with God? No they are not. Do you believe that it is possible for God to enjoy torturing little children? Do you believe that it is possible for God to lie and deceive? Do you believe it is possible for God to be so shallow that the only thing God really enjoys is a six-pack of beer?

The message of the Bible is that God *cannot* be that way. Those things are impossible for God, not because God could not do them, but because God *will* not do them. God chose to establish boundaries of what is possible and what is not. In creating order out of chaos, God chose to limit God's self by making boundaries, some of which even God will not cross, even if it breaks God's heart not to cross them.

Like Job, like the disciples, all of us have a need to figure out who God is, and how God works. In order to do that, we first need to understand what the boundaries are. God allows us to do that in two ways: from what God reveals to us in the handiwork of God's creation, and from what God reveals to us in the authority of the Word.

I have often said there is a lot of pointless argument between the religious world and the scientific world about where the boundaries are and what they mean. It doesn't have to be.

Here is what I have found to be a good rule of thumb: if you want to know what the boundaries are that God created for the universe, look to science. If you want to know the boundaries that God created for God, look to religion.

As God's speech explains to Job, God is beyond our understanding, and infinitely more complex. Yet God is not unknowable. God has made a point of letting us know the boundaries that need to be respected. God reveals those boundaries in the Word.

The Bible tells us that God is bound by promises. God has to keep them. God is bound by the principles of love and justice and truth and mercy. God cannot go against them and still be God.

That's why God comes down so hard on Job. Job assumed that since God allowed bad things to happen to good people, that God ignores boundaries of love and compassion. God is so powerful that God does not have to obey the rules of justice.

And that, says God, is simply not true. In the Bible, God tells us, "Whatever else you know about me, never forget this. You will never find me setting foot outside the boundaries of love and justice. Never!"

So we're still trying to work our way out of this paradox. Bad things happen to good people. How can God let these things happen if God is always compassionate and just?

Listen to God's answer to Job. If God can be bound by love, then God can be bound by other things as well. There are boundaries that have to be created in order for *relationship* to take place, for life to take place.

There can be no life without choice, without change, without possibilities, without chance. There can be no freedom without the possibility of being cruel, both for humans and for nature. If God operates and controls everything in the universe, then existence is meaningless. God's relationship with the world would be like trying to have a relationship with a computer program.

God chose to create real, loving relationship. And so God set up boundaries that limited God's power in order to make life and relationship possible, with our natural world and with each other. Because God chose to set boundaries that make life meaningful, there are things God cannot do.

Job's friends concluded that when tragedy strikes, it's the victim's fault. You are responsible for all your pain. For many centuries and even today, Christians have made the same mistake, with devastating results: adding a load of shame to people who are already struggling under a mountain of grief. Blaming the victim. The book of Job says that is not only wrong, but cruel.

Job concluded that when tragedy strikes, it's God doing. God is responsible for all your pain. Many Christians today make the same mistake, with devastating results. Many dealing with loss become bitter and abandon their faith. The book of Job says that blaming God is wrong.

In Job, God declares that the ultimate reason for tragedy is that people get caught on the wrong side of boundaries—on the wrong side of the possibility of cruelty.

If you want to know why God set the boundaries where God did, good luck. For nearly three full chapters God fires a series of questions at Job that all ask the same basic thing: Do you know why I set the boundaries where I did? That's not something Job can begin to understand. We can never know why God set the boundaries where they are.

The message of Job is: don't go jumping to conclusions about what God is or isn't doing, or what God should or shouldn't be doing in our lives.

There comes a point where we need to trust. We know enough about God from God's created order and from God's revealed Word to know that God cannot be anything other than good, compassionate, wise, and just. While humans are capable of trampling all over those boundaries, and frequently do so, we know that God will not.

We hold on to faith that whatever boundaries restrict God's power, they exist because a good, compassionate, wise and just God chose to put them there.

And we know from the Gospel reading that God has tremendous power. God uses that power, not to eliminate all storms from our lives, but to help us weather those storms when they hit.

Knowing that is enough to fill us with joy and thanksgiving in the best of times. And to give comfort and hope in even the worst of times, trusting that Almighty God is working to bring good out of whatever happens to us. God calls us as Christians to join in that life-giving mission as well.