

Job 42:1-6
Mark 10:46-52

NPMC
October 27, 2024

What we see(k)

It was just over a year ago that I had surgery. The wait leading up to surgery seemed interminable and my strength and vitality were ebbing with each day. The experience of this kind of weakness, helplessness and lack of control was a new one for me. I had never before been disabled with disease and I was very anxious about the outcome. However, this was a fixable problem and happily a few hours of surgery, minus almost a foot of innards later, I was on the road to recovery. I never appealed to the Divine for answers to the question, “why?”. I did pray for patience and endurance and relied totally on the help of medical specialists however all the while I knew there was a very effective and concrete solution to my problems.

That was not to be the same for Eve, my husband Ken’s granddaughter. In 2019 at the age of 16, Eve was diagnosed with an incredibly invasive and treatment-resistant tumour growing at the base of her spine: a grapefruit-sized growth entwined around her spinal cord. This congregation – many of you here - prayed for Eve in the last months of her young life as she grew weaker. Over the course of four years and almost 30 significant medical procedures, Eve died a difficult death.

Eve was a tenacious young woman of strong faith. She spoke of feeling God’s presence as she endured one surgery after another. Eve read parts of the bible with her mom and her mom read to her as the end approached. And, indeed, there came the time when Eve did ask the question, “why?” Had God abandoned her? Those were some of the hardest conversations I have had with anyone. I did not have an answer. I could not with any satisfaction say, “Well, now we have that all cleared up!” There were times when I know that she felt distance between her and God but she took God at God’s word and wanted to know why she was suffering and why God might let her die. How could God really care about her, love her as the bible promises and allow this to happen? The oft-cited bromide, “everything happens for a reason” had no place in these gut-wrenching conversations. I

don't believe that we ever came up with a satisfactory answer but I believe that Eve trusted God enough to ask the questions and to live and die without knowing all the answers. It is this faith in God's openness and compassion that allowed her and allows us to seek, even to demand, an explanation when we suffer, when we feel rejected, are angry or confused. This we encounter in the bible. The stories of Job and Bartimaeus in today's lectionary readings speak to our human desire to know the cause of things, to see into the intricacies, to understand the complexities of life.

Job, too, trusted God and had the freedom and the courage to ask the "why" question. Job is a familiar hero and is often set apart as a paragon of patience. Well, in my opinion Job is patient only to the extent that he persists in defending himself as a blameless person who loves God. He ceaselessly argues with his friends and the heavenly forces that he has done nothing to deserve the fate that he is dealt. Once a wealthy patriarch, now his entire family dead, all his livestock and property gone, Job has been deserted by everyone except for three friends who take turns blaming him for the terrible losses he has suffered. And speaking of suffering, he is further beset with excruciating pain: sores covering his entire body. Job maintains his innocence and faithfulness, insisting that he didn't do anything to provoke this kind of suffering. He demands from God an accounting. Why?

Two Sundays ago, we heard stories of Russian Mennonites from Ukraine fleeing death and disaster, settling in Canada, beginning a new life in the Pleasant Point area on Schwager Farm #2. Once prosperous farmers in the old country, these families experienced murder, starvation and violence. They ran for their lives. Communities were uprooted or obliterated and many, many people died. What is wrong with humanity: how do you make sense of this carnage?

It's not only Job or Eve or the families who settled on the Schwager Farm, who seek to understand the imponderables of life. It is all of us. We have stories that need telling, stories of events in our lives and in the lives of those we love that are incredibly hard to accept. We are not satisfied with, "Everything happens for a reason." We want to see, to

know, to understand the why of pain, injustice, debilitation and loss. How do these realities square with our faith in a God of compassion? How can God allow this?

What does Job discover at the end of it all, in the scripture that we read this morning? We might not be satisfied with the answer or non-answer. The final scene of the story takes place after God has appeared to Job in a whirlwind displaying power and might! In the face of the sheer ferocity of God's presence Job acquiesces; he gives up arguing. He admits that he, Job, is not God and does not understand the source of God's creative strength or intention. In the full force of God's presence, Job concedes his own ignorance **and yet** testifies: "now my eye sees you." At that moment Job does come to an understanding: he "sees." Seeing, often, is the biblical equivalent for knowing. He doesn't know and can't ever know the deepest workings of the universe...but learns something about God. In addition to all that God is: love, compassion, encourager, discernor, God is also mystery. Our multiverse is mystery. How life begins and ends is mystery. We simply cannot know everything. Such is our reality as human beings and such is our reality as people of faith. We don't have to know everything in order to acknowledge the grace and mercy of God and to live in God's ways, especially in difficult times.

(Picture of Bartimaeus)

The other story today is the centuries-later story of another soul who wants to see. Bartimaeus, a blind man, obviously a poor man, who once had sight, sits on the roadside begging. He hears that it is Jesus who is coming by along the road, so Bartimaeus calls out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." The crowd tries to shut him up but that does not deter him and he calls out again, "Son of David, have mercy on me." Kind of like Job, Bartimaeus is tenacious, like Eve, he doesn't give up. He feels the freedom, has the faith to meet Jesus face to face. And indeed, Jesus calls him. "Call him here," Jesus instructs the crowd.

This blind man "springs up", throwing off his cloak. And here I borrow shamelessly from Ched Myers, who was here with us this summer. In his striking commentary, "Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus", Ched maintains that in

throwing off his cloak, Bartimaeus leaves behind his sole source of income. It is onto the cloak that money is thrown as people pass by and that is his only hope of collecting it. But Bartimaeus abandons all that he knows in his haste to meet Jesus.

He begs for Jesus' mercy. And for what does he ask when Jesus says to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" In a lead up to this story Jesus asks his disciples the same question. Ironically, they seek prestige and position: they ask to sit at Jesus' right and left hand, in his glory. Bartimaeus, whose sole existence depends on alms and charity does not ask Jesus for money. That would have been the easiest and most obvious request I would think. He doesn't ask for stuff to secure his future. He asks Jesus to restore his sight: "My teacher, let me see again." As in the story of Job, here is the notion of "seeing": a key ingredient in encounters with God, with Jesus. Not only does Bartimaeus seek to be healed of blindness, he wants to see, to know. Jesus responds to his request for renewed sight, "Go; your faith has made you well." And the story ends abruptly, "Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way." It is the beginning of a new way of life for Bartimaeus. He trusts, he sees, he follows, immediately and with his whole being. He is up and gone and most surely can't have known what the future would hold except that he is going to follow Jesus.

You don't have to understand everything to find "the way" forward. In fact, Ched Myers challenges us with this Bartimaeus-inspired insight, "...only if we recognize our blindness and seek true vision—then can the discipleship adventure carry on." (Myers, p. 282) So, what are we looking for? What do we seek? What do we see?

Each of us will answer these questions differently and our answers have probably changed along the way. We search for different things at different times of our lives. In the final analysis I believe we simply want to understand what happens to us? What is going on in the world around us? What can I do to make a difference: to make things different? Knowing what we know or don't know about Creator and creation how may we live faithful lives, lives of service and lives with meaning? We do want to carry on the discipleship adventure that Ched suggests.

In our congregation the women's bible study group asks these questions all the time. The men's study as well, digs into the ultimate questions of life and scripture and faith. We heard from Geraldine a few Sundays ago about diversity and ways in which Anabaptism has taken root around the world. We heard Tammy speak about inclusion and the mission of Ronald MacDonald House and the opportunities of service in our larger community. Tammy and Geraldine both addressed issues of reconciliation. We come to this service on Sunday mornings to receive new insights and renewed inspiration for daily living. We want to see, to understand.

The Job story reminds us that there are things about creation, human nature and God's mercy that we will never understand. Now I didn't mention that Job's story ends with God rewarding Job by giving back everything that was taken from him, multiplied two-fold and Job lived to 140 years. Commentators suggest that this was a later addition to make the story more palatable. I don't mind leaving Job at that place where he realizes that he cannot know everything yet praises God in spite of it all. We will not have all the answers to our questions nevertheless we trust in a God who is love.

Bartimaeus jumps up and with his regained sight or newly acquired insight, without hesitation follows Jesus on the way. So, I put it to you: Can you move ahead in your life, knowing that you don't know everything yet knowing that you know enough to know the way of Jesus? Do you know enough about the character of God to trust that you will not be abandoned, that you are loved? I believe that collectively we know the depth of God's grace and the challenge of Jesus' call. We can't know it all. We don't have to know it all. What we need is each other, walking together in faith into the places and spaces we find ourselves. God sees us! God loves us! This is what we know! It is enough! AMEN