Journeying with Job

It’s too bad we don’t have more time to spend with the book of Job. It is a great meditation on the mystery of the suffering of the innocent. But it takes all 42 chapters for the full picture to unfold.

Let me give a two minute overview. The story opens with Job being a tremendously blessed man; he had everything anyone could want. God says to Satan: “just look at how faithful my servant Job is!” “Sure”, replies Satan, “Because he is so blessed. Take it away, and he will curse you!” Satan asks permission to test him, and in one day, with unbelievable disaster following disaster, Job loses everything. Finally, he is afflicted with a terribly painful illness.

The excerpt we just heard in our 1st reading comes from the depth of his pain and grief. The value for us? It does name a place that suffering can take us. While no one may ever experience the series of tragedies the author of Job assembles, most do know of the spiritual darkness today’s reading captures.

The question? Will Job curse God, or remain righteous? His supposed friends tell him he must have done evil to deserve such suffering, but he maintains his innocence. In the end, God speaks to Job, the one thing Job had been requesting right along. Job’s spiritual state is transformed, and as the book draws to a close, everything is restored, and more.

Before getting a bit deeper into this topic of illness and suffering, I would like to begin pointing out how our basic human understanding of these things has grown in 3,000 years. In the Old Testament days, when Job was written, health and illness were a total mystery. At the time of Jesus, it was only slightly better. There were doctors, but their understanding of the body was more imagination than science. Many things we take for granted, that even children learn, have only been discovered in the last few hundred years.

Our ability to manage illness physically now a days is nothing less than astounding. Advances seem to come every day.

Recognizing and understanding the mind’s role in health and illness, psychological knowledge, has also grown exponentially.

Whole new medical sciences and specialties are continually being born. Not only that: thanks to the explosion of communication technologies, all this knowledge is accessible to anyone with a computer.

When I began visiting parishioners in the hospital as a seminarian, like Victor or Carlos might do now, half the time patients were lucky to be able to name their diagnosis. Now, most people can talk about their diagnosis like a doctor on medical rounds. They can fill you in on their meds like a pharmacist, sometimes even making suggestions to their doctor!

But one area hasn’t fared as well – the spiritual dimensions of health and illness. Ironically, the breakthroughs are not nearly as recent, yet we seem to need to rediscover them on our own all too often.
The book of Job, source of our 1st reading, marks one breakthrough.

The ministry of Jesus in our Gospel today is another.

The Eucharist we celebrate, the events of Holy Week, the paschal mystery led us to the greatest breakthrough.

Unfortunately, the understanding doesn’t come through a quick search on the internet. It unfolds in a life of faith. No shortcuts. For us Christians, it takes a relationship with Jesus, becoming a disciple, and opening ourselves to the paschal mystery. There is no magic procedure, no pill, experimental or otherwise, that will manage the spiritual dimensions of illness. That’s the bad news.

The good news – God is always ready to journey with us through doubts, questioning, anger, emptiness, fear and darkness; even the darkest depression we heard in our first reading. God longs to lead us to the other side, beyond the spiritual anguish illness can bring on. We need only let God in along the way, and accept that the darkness may not be fleeting; it can cling for quite a while.

At times God leads to peace through physical healing, whether miraculous, and miracles still do happen, or through the skill God gives to doctors and God’s blessing. At other times, the peace is found in the grace needed for a long journey. The last healing is the ultimate healing; the fullness of salvation, to the life beyond pain and suffering.

The breakthrough in the first reading was this. At the time Job was written, many folks believed that good health must mean God is pleased with you. Illness must mean you have done something wrong, and God is punishing you. If you read through the 42 chapters of Job, the many ways Job’s so-called friends keep telling him this can weary you! Over and over he is tormented with: “the tragedies in your life must be your fault. Repent, and all will go well.” The story goes through most of the foolish assumptions that are possible, ways of thinking that are still bandied about, and that can seep into our own thinking. The breakthrough: after continually asking to have his day in court with God, to assert his innocence, Job’s request is granted. God responds, and speaks to Job. His friend’s explanations weren’t even worth refuting. Instead, God asks Job: “Were you there when I laid the foundations of the earth, when the morning stars sang together? Where is the dwelling place of light? Do you understand all the wonders of nature, and create them? Is it by your wisdom the hawk soars, or the eagle makes its nest?” After God recounts four chapters of wonder for Job, his perspective changes. Immersed in wonder and God’s awesomeness, flooded with humility, Job says “I heard of you with my ears, but now I see you, and repent in dust and ashes.” For a hidden sin? No. For arrogance. He gets it: we are surrounded by a world of wonder, much is beyond our grasp, and the answers we seek for suffering are beyond us. But once we truly experience God beyond many of the foolish things we think about God, once mystery embraces us, our initial questions lose much of their urgency, as trust and wonder take hold.

In the Gospel, another breakthrough: Jesus, as the revelation of God, has the power to heal. Just as suffering can come on with no prior notice or explanation, healing can come miraculously.
Healing reveals God’s compassion. It was a sign of the kingdom, of salvation. Jesus preached a new world, and allowed some to taste that new world through his healing power. Suffering, illness, the powers that bring evil into the world do not have the last say! But not everyone experiences physical healing like Peter’s mother-in-law.

St. Paul had some affliction he called a thorn in the flesh. Healing for him was not a miraculous cure, but the grace to bear with the affliction, and offer his suffering, with Jesus, for the salvation of others. How could he do that? The breakthrough of the cross and resurrection: suffering, even, and perhaps especially of the innocent need not be meaningless. Jesus suffering was a powerful force, love written in sacrifice. It conquered sin and death, and brought salvation and new life into the world. The paschal mystery reveals that God loves us so much, God enters into suffering with us, shares it, endured it, and broke its power to swallow us in death.

Suffering alone, without hope, is what our first reading captures, but as you read on in Job, even before the paschal mystery, God came to him in his suffering, and everything changed.

The Eucharist, the sacrament of anointing, all the sacraments are moments of the Lord entering into our life, to be with us; as we come into the world, as we grow and mature, when ready to pledge a life together in marriage, or preparing for a life of ministry, in our weekly journey, in illness, as we prepare to go home to God.

God can lift us in this life to physical, psychological or emotional healing. We pray for that in the sacrament of anointing. It is a sacrament of healing.

God can keep us from mistaken guilt, from seeing suffering only as punishment or abandonment, answering our questions with mystery, the only answer worthy of the name.

God can give us grace so that suffering may afflict our body, but not our spirit. Paul recognized, and gave witness to that: in his own weakness, God’s grace could shine through.

Wherever the journey of illness is to lead, we can offer our suffering with Jesus in the sacrifice of the Mass. We may experience physical healing, and for that we can praise God. Spiritual healing is just as real – I’ve seen it so many times, right here in our parish, and in every parish I have served. One can only stand in awe. The onus of suffering is changed, and grace does shine through.

Our Christian journey:

Beginning with Baptism, we die and rise with Christ spiritually. As our journey continues, we die and rise with him sacramentally. We grow in embracing the mystery hidden in our losses; we die to various things, people we love die, yet we discover they are still alive, in us, and in God. As we journey through life, suffering at times paves the path to being renewed inside. And at the end, we die and rise with Christ to the eternal promise and eternal life, Life beyond pain, beyond tears, beyond suffering. Back to Job: God may to come to us in a whirlwind, but God does come to us when we choose to make the journey with Jesus, and with the friends he brings into our life in his church.