

Catholic Church of the Beatitudes

Santa Barbara, CA

The Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time, Cycle B – Feb. 4, 2012

Anne Goodrich Heck

Reflections on **Job 7: 1-4, 6-7; 1 Cor. 9: 16-19, 22-23; Mk 1: 29-39**

We have quite a diverse set of readings today! The first reading is one of the saddest in our lectionary, so if you had trouble saying “Thanks be to God” after it, you are not alone!

The outline of Job's story is easy to narrate: it's an old folk tale. Job is an upright and reverent man, and also a prosperous one. God is so pleased with him that he points him out to a member of his court, “ha Satan,” literally “the adversary,” (not yet conceived of as a separate force for evil in the world). “Ha Satan” replies, “Sure, Job blesses you – as long as life is good to him, but if you take it all away, he will curse you.” So God allows Satan to test Job, which he does. He destroys all his herds and his servants; he causes the roof to fall in on his seven sons and three daughters, killing them all; and he gives Job a loathsome, disfiguring disease, so that even Job's wife tells him to go ahead and curse God. This Job refuses to do, so he passes Satan's test, and God gives him twice the riches he had before and a whole new set of children!

But this little moralizing tale is not what really interests the author of Job. Instead, he uses the tale as a framework to explore the issue of God and suffering: Why do bad things happen to good people? What does suffering say about God? The author lets a variety of people speak their thoughts: Job, of course, at various points in the discussion; three friends who come to comfort him, but whose attempts to explain away his suffering all fall flat; a young, rather pompous know-it-all, who thinks it's up to him to defend God; and finally God himself.

Today's passage is near the beginning, when Job is feeling overwhelmed with calamity. As you heard, his words are a *lament* about how hard life can be: drudgery all day, tossing and turning all night – and for what? The passage ends with a very poignant image: “my days pass as swiftly as

a weaver's shuttle” – going monotonously back and forth across the loom – until it runs out of thread. I know our translation says it runs out of “hope”; that is because there is an untranslatable double meaning, a pun, in the Hebrew. The ear of the listener hears “hope” and “thread” at the same time.

Incidentally, Job does not stay in this frame of mind for the whole book. Twenty-odd chapters later he loses his proverbial patience and speaks out in defense of the way he has conducted his life: “What do I do to deserve this?” This provokes God to speak, and Job has a humbling and awe-inspiring encounter with the Almighty. God ends up saying that Job has spoken correctly, with integrity, as his intended comforters have not.

The Book of Job tells us that there is a place for lament in our lives. We do not have to pretend before God; we have permission to voice our deepest grief, and even our anger. The psalms do this, for example, and they are ours when we need them, to help us find the words. Think of Jesus crying out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” quoting Psalm 22. The feelings are real, but perhaps we feel a little less alone when we can use the words of a religious tradition that tells us that someone else – the psalmist, Jesus, Job – has been there first.

It is a long way from Job's lament – a literary work exploring a universal theme – to Paul's very down-to-earth letter to the Corinthians, which deals with the everyday foibles of that community and, along the way, also reveals the strong personality of Paul himself. I am sure you remember last week's reading, when Paul voices the opinion that married people are preoccupied with their spouses and not totally devoted to God's work. Paul's strong sense of urgency (as Gary pointed out last week), was fueled by his conviction that the time was short before Christ

would come again. We see Paul's urgency again today. He is "under compulsion," to use his words, and so he chooses to preach the gospel free of charge, to increase his chances of reaching as many people as possible while he can.

This is admirable, but not everyone is able or willing to do that, as Paul himself acknowledged just a few verses earlier (verses not included in our lectionary!). There Paul says that he would have a legitimate right to ask the community to provide for some of his expenses, such as room and board. After all, the other apostles, including "the brothers of the Lord" and Peter, accept this for themselves *and their wives*, who traveled with them. Paul's model of evangelization was very successful, but other communities were evangelized by other people, including women, who undoubtedly had access to places men could not go.

As we know, the culture of the Eastern Mediterranean was (and often still is) very reticent about private life, especially wives, who are kept behind a curtain, as it were. So I am glad that Paul drew aside the curtain just a bit. On the other hand we should not be too surprised that Peter's wife, in today's gospel, is entirely invisible.

Jesus has returned from attending the Sabbath service in the synagogue in Capernaum. There, as we heard last week, he taught with an authority that astounded his hearers. And he demonstrated that authority by casting out an unclean spirit who recognized his power and tried to "out" him as the "Holy One of God." In Mark's gospel this is the first public salvo of Jesus' ministry, one that shows him to be more than a match for the "principalities and powers" of the time, including the forces of religious and political corruption that will conspire to eliminate Jesus.

But now Jesus has retreated to the privacy of Simon Peter and Andrew's house, which was only about 35 yards away, according to archeological evidence from Capernaum. There would have been quite a few people living in a fairly small compound: Simon Peter, Andrew, and both their families, including Peter's mother-in-law, who was ill. We have to assume that Peter's wife was there too, in her own home, caring for her sick mother.

If the exorcism of the man with the unclean spirit was the first public act of Jesus' ministry, then the healing of Peter's mother-in-law was the first *private* one, outside the public eye, showing Jesus' compassion in the lives of ordinary, unnoticed people. But like the first, public, healing, it is a paradigm, a model, of what Jesus is about.

Two features in Mark's account are worth noting. First, Jesus "took her by the hand and helped her up," in our translation. I like these simple, ordinary words to describe Jesus' very human gesture. But the Greek verb has an additional connotation; it says that he "raised her up." Mark would use this verb to describe other healings, and of course Paul and others had been using it for decades, to describe Jesus' resurrection. We have to assume that Mark's use of this verb is deliberate: there is one divine power at work in all these instances, whether to heal a sick woman, or to raise Jesus from the dead.

Secondly, the woman, having been "raised up," "went about her work" – except that the verb used here is *diakonein*, to serve" or to "minister," the word from which we get our word "deacon." Here the connotation is that Peter's mother-in-law became a disciple, serving those at hand, which is what disciples do; they serve.

Today's gospel does not end here, of course. No sooner has the sun set, signaling the end of the Sabbath, than the whole town crowds around the door, seeking healing. The need – probably mixed with curiosity – was overwhelming. Obviously a small private house was not refuge enough for Jesus, so early the next morning he made his escape to a deserted spot where he could pray in peace. There his disciples found him, and Jesus told them that he needed to expand his ministry from his home base in Capernaum to the whole of Galilee.

It was an amazing first day, with a lot more to come. We will be following Mark's account of what Jesus did, and what the male disciples learned along the way. But I invite you to ponder for a while how the women in Jesus' life, including Peter's wife and mother-in-law, "served" the mission in place, in Capernaum – long before Peter and his wife hit the road on their missionary journeys together.