

Now I See

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October 28, 2018 (Chapel Service)
Job 42: 1-6, 10-17
Mark 10: 46-52

Eleven of our Jewish brothers and sisters massacred at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. A black brother and sister gunned down in Kentucky. Mail bombs sent around the country to political leaders. Fear dominates our society, and fear of extremists and their senseless acts of violence is all around us. This is one kind of fear, but there are many other real fears that affect different people to varying degrees: fear of poverty, disease, hunger, abuse, threats of physical harm, disability, ridicule, and others unique to ones situation in life. All these fears cause what some have termed, “toxic stress.” They have a negative impact on a child’s development, and they can cause adults to lose hope in having a life with meaning. Our Call to Worship was taken from Psalm 34: 1-3. The 4th verse reads: “I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.” What does it mean to be delivered from all one’s fears? That is the central question of the Book of Job, and it is a question that frames our own searches for meaning.

I would like to say I have an answer to that question, but even the Book of Job is ambiguous. We can affirm this much: Job feels a heavy burden of suffering. You recall that he was a very wealthy man, and all his worldly goods were taken away. He had had a happy family life, and then all his children—seven sons and three

daughters—were killed. His body had been whole but then became diseased; he is covered with painful sores. His wife provides no support. She tells him, “Curse God and die.” Through all this suffering Job tries to make sense of his plight, and he can find no answer. He cries out to God, but God does not respond—at least not for a long time. When the response comes, God does not address Job’s questions. Instead, God states, in essence, “Who I am and what I am is beyond your comprehension.” In response to this revelation, **Job changes**. He repents of his questioning, submits completely to God, forgives the friends who had blamed **him** for his suffering, and receives assurance of God’s acceptance of him and steady presence with him.

Job is delivered from all his fears, but is this realistically what can happen to us in the midst of our own fears? Let’s consider the story of Walter McMillian, the centerpiece of Bryan Stevenson’s book, *Just Mercy*. Walter is a middle-aged man who is working with a friend on his truck’s transmission when the murder of a young woman eleven miles away is committed. A man named Ralph, accused in connection with another murder case, cooperates with law enforcement officers, who badly need to solve the young woman’s murder and get a conviction. Ralph concocts a story, which he recants years later, that identifies Walter as the murderer. Walter is convicted and goes to death row to await execution. Bryan Stevenson, who is an attorney, works hard to secure Walter’s release from prison and is ultimately successful, but only after Walter has spent six years on death row. In a documentary on his life Walter says this: “They put me on death row for six years! They threatened me for six years. They tortured me with the promise of

execution for six years. I lost my job. I lost my wife. I lost my reputation. I lost my—I lost my dignity. I lost everything” (Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy*, p. 254). You will recall that Job never blamed God for his plight, and Walter never blamed God either. Walter is like Job in another important way. Mr. Stevenson notes in his Epilogue that Walter “genuinely forgave the people who unfairly accused him...the people who judged him unworthy of mercy” (p. 314).

Walter’s story, even more than Job’s, brought home to me what transformation in suffering really means. It is about an experience of mercy, unexpected and undeserved, that allows a person to set aside his or her own suffering in order to extend merciful forgiveness to others or even just one other person. This is what Job did, and this is what Walter did. What makes this possible? The first step appears to be an insight. Job, like you and me, had heard about God. He knew God existed, and Job questions God’s motives in allowing a world where innocents suffer. But when Job sees God in the whirlwind, in the storm-tossed circumstances of his wretched life, he experiences God’s presence and that is all he needs to totally trust that God was never absent from him. This is God’s mercy—a love that penetrates the fabric of our lives and is suddenly evident when we least expect it. What good is that when you are suffering? Well, it appears to make all the difference in the world. It opens the possibility that suffering can be endured. It opens the possibility that one’s own suffering becomes an avenue for connection to the suffering of others. To quote Bryan Stevenson again, “...being broken is what makes us human...[the] source of our common humanity” (289). When we are able to embrace our brokenness and understand its power to connect us to God and to others, we begin

to see reality differently. No longer is it “us” and “them”; rather, it is “we,” every human being, who are claimed by God.

Where do you and I fit into this picture? I believe that none of us has experienced death row, but we all have fears. Often, these fears have their origin in a deep sense of loss. It is a fear of losing our grounding, our security, our sense of well-being. We don't expect God to change reality for us, we don't expect a magical transformation of the reality that is our lives. We do, like the psalmist, look to be delivered from all our fears. As I listened to Harrison Lutzer speak last Sunday, it struck me that he and others in our youth program had learned to see reality differently through eyes of faith. It didn't happen all the time. It didn't mean that all the toxic stresses of life were magically erased. It led, rather, to a confidence in God's presence and an expectation of God's mercy that produces hope. As Job discovered, it is not God who changes; it is Job who changes. He sees God for the first time as a free agent, whose actions cannot be predicted because human beings cannot comprehend God. He sees a God whose creative energy is unbounded by human perceptions. God's freedom is found in God's unpredictable appearance out of the storms of life and the unique ways in which love, mercy, and justice prevail.

Bryan Stevenson makes a very important observation toward the end of his book: “When you experience mercy, you learn things that are hard to learn otherwise. You see things that you can't otherwise see.” Remember old Bartimaeus, the blind beggar. He cried out for mercy from Jesus. The crowd around Jesus initially told him to be quiet. He persisted just as we should persist. We must persist in claiming God's understanding of us through his Son. It is God's

understanding and love that gives us reason to hope that our lives have meaning despite circumstances of toxic stress. The reality is that we are blind like Bartimaeus, and we lack understanding like Job. We all need to be delivered from our fears to begin to see reality through eyes of faith. This is what God's mercy is about. And our Scripture assures us that all who persist in trusting God to open a way for them will experience this deliverance. For me this happened when I saw the power of love on a pediatric cancer ward 48 years ago. In that setting death was a regular occurrence, but length of years felt much less relevant for meaning in life than the depth of love in relationships. I may still fear death and pain at times, but there is the constant realization that God is present even when God feels absent.

Scripture tells us to recognize our need for God's mercy in order to experience God's mercy. This mercy is evident when we are embraced by relationships that sustain us in painful times. Knowing that God is free, we cannot presume to know why things happen the way they do or what action God should take to remove our pain. We do affirm that God chooses a relationship with you and me and every other human being on this earth. As followers of Christ we choose not to judge ourselves or others for our circumstances, even though we can find many reasons to blame ourselves or others for bad outcomes. Rather, we throw off old perceptions and burdens, just as Bartimaeus threw off his cloak, to claim a new life in Christ. My challenge to us all this week is to consider ways we can receive God's mercy and share that mercy with at least one other person. Can we find an opportunity to forgive as we have been forgiven, to give mercy as we have received mercy? To do so is to experience what it means to be delivered from all our fears. Then we can say

with Job and Bartimaeus and Walter McMillian and Bryan Stevenson and many others, “Now I see!”—not perfectly, not completely, but enough to live by faith in the God who has redeemed us and will never abandons us. Amen.