



## *Thoughts on the Journey...*

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It's been awhile since I've read from the Book of Job in the bible but, in reviewing the readings for this weekend, I was so strongly drawn to the first reading that I felt compelled to re-read the Book of Job. In lieu of the past several months in the life of our parish, it gave me great comfort to reflect on the message in this Old Testament book.

To give a very brief summary, Job is a wealthy man living in a land called Uz with his large family and extensive flocks. He is "blameless" and "upright," always careful to avoid doing wrong. One day, Satan appears before God in heaven. God boasts to Satan about Job's goodness, but Satan argues that Job is only good because God has blessed him abundantly. Satan challenges God that, if given permission to punish the man, Job will turn and curse God. God allows Satan to torment Job to test this bold claim, but he forbids Satan to take Job's life in the process. In the course of one day, Job receives four messages bearing bad news that his livestock, servants, and ten children were all dead due to invaders and natural disasters. Job's grief was profound, but he still praises God in his prayers. This didn't turn out as Satan had hoped, so he asked God if he could test Job again by infesting him with terrible skin sores. To make matters worse, his wife encourages him to curse God, but Job refuses and continues to trust God and accept his circumstances.

In his profound grief, Job laments and proclaims that he will never see happiness again. Three of his friends joined him and, out of respect for his mourning, sat with him in silence for seven days. At the end of their silence, each friend offers their opinion as to why these terrible things happened to Job. Their comments laid blame on Job's sinfulness. They were sure that he or his children did something to anger God and that Job should seek God's favor. One friend went so far as to suggest that his punishment probably should have been worse! (some friend). Keep in mind that all of Job's afflictions were brought on by Satan's request to God to allow him test Job in order to prove that Job would not be faithful in the face of extreme hardship. Job's hardships had nothing to do with anything Job did or didn't do.

Job denounced his friends and sustains his confidence in God, knowing that heaven would vouch for his innocence. Finally, in a whirlwind, God interrupts the exchange between these men. He calls Job to be brave and to respond to a series of rhetorical questions that will reveal the power of God. Job was overwhelmed by the encounter and acknowledges the limits of his human understanding and the power of God. In the end, God forgave his friends for spouting such unsound advice and returns Job to good health, restores his wealth, blesses him with more children, and a long life.

The Psalm this weekend says it best:

**"Praise the Lord, who heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds."**

For over 16 months we experienced the joy and happiness that Fr. Jim brought to our community and his joy was contagious. He had a gift for renewing our enthusiasm for our Catholicism. He reignited our love for Mass and managed to ritualize the feasts and celebrations during the liturgical year so that we would see the richness of our faith. He made every person who came through the doors of our church feel loved and relevant. As a result, we couldn't wait to see what new dimension he would bring to our faith lives. Like Job we were living the parish dream! As word spread, our numbers grew and more people were committed to being actively involved in volunteerism and ministry.

Also, like Job, we were hit with a crushing blow when Fr. Jim was put on leave. We anguished over the who, what, and why's of his absence. As hard as that entire experience was, his tragic death brought about profound shock and grief, not only for our parishioners, but everyone who knew and loved him. The loss of his presence hung over our parish (and beyond) like a wet pall. Personally, there are still moments when I weep at the thought of it all. But, like Job, I keep remembering that all good gifts come from God and Jim's gifts, as we knew them, came from God and blessed our community. Nothing Fr. Jim did or didn't do should change the focus of our faith. Humans are flawed beings - all of us! God still gives us gifts and wants us to use those gifts (even in our weakness) not so it will bring us to one another, but so it will bring us to Him - the only source of true happiness and peace.

Like the circumstances of Satan's challenge to shake the faith of Job, we as a people have been challenged. Like Job's friend's, we have been subjected to judgement, gossip, and opinion - and that does nothing but create a layer of distraction that pulls us away from Christ. God always sees and knows far more than we are capable of seeing and knowing. We don't just trust God because everything is good in our world. We are called to trust and fix our gaze on him in all circumstances, especially in times of crisis, loss, and tragedy. Our God is exactly who he says he is. He's precisely the God that Fr. Jim wanted us to see and know: the God of love, the God of mercy, the God of compassion, the God of forgiveness. We are a strong and resilient people because of the Spirit who dwells in us and among us. Let us look to the cross of Christ and remember his surrender to his Father in heaven and let us follow in his footsteps.