

“Fragile: Handle with Care”

Job 2:2-9, Romans 5:1-5

June 23, 2019

There is an old Arab proverb: Trust God, but tie up your camel. In one short, pithy statement, the entire dilemma, or ambivalence, or human perplexity about what it means to have faith, what it means to doubt, and what it means to pray, is summarized.

Now most of us have experienced some sort of faith crisis during our lives, when we thought that we could not, or even dared not, trust in God. Or even if we did, tinged around the edges of our consciousness there might have been some lingering doubts, or fears, that our trust would not be rewarded, at least not in the way we wanted. And this lack of total and complete faith or trust is something that many of us have had guilty feelings about.

But doubting is nothing to be ashamed of, necessarily. Such events or episodes may lead ultimately to a stronger or deeper faith. But, sometimes, it takes a great deal of time and inner struggle. And that’s alright too, given the nature of who we are as human beings, and what faith is all about.

For faith is often fragile. Why? Because life is often fragile. Life can be difficult at times and often the unexpected can happen. Sometimes, the happiness we have found one moment can be gone the next. During the good times, when all is well with the world, it’s easy to have a strong faith. If everything around us is good, then we feel that God is good. And sometimes we even remember to thank God, and occasionally we even praise God, if we get around to it, for doing a nice job.

But what happens to our lives and to our faith when there is a sudden and unexpected crisis, when someone we love dies, when we have to watch a friend or family member suffer a long and torturous illness, when a long-awaited child is miscarried, or is stillborn, or is born with congenital defects? Suddenly, our foundation may not feel quite as firm, and may even shatter.

In those moments, we may turn to God, only to sense an emptiness in the universe. We may search for God, but cannot perceive the divine presence found in all creation. Even worse, we may lash out at those around us, both human and immortal, for the state we are in.

Most of you know I like to watch Masterpiece on PBS, and there was a series a number of years ago about a teacher in a school for boys. Our hero, a victim of shell shock in the Great War, slowly puts his life back together by the grace of God and through the confidence the school shows in hiring him, proving he can stand on his own two feet. Eventually he falls in love, marries, and in a few years is father to twin girls. All was wonderful in their world - until one morning when the young mother and her twins drove to town to have their portrait taken. On the way home, a runaway truck smashes into their car and dumps tons of debris on the little family.

One minute there was life, happiness, hope - the next, death. On hearing the news of the accident, after trying to console the young school teacher, the wife of the school Chaplain turns to her husband and says, "Your God has a lot to answer for today."

Has YOUR God ever had a lot to answer for? Has blaming God ever made you feel better, as it did Job? It's so easy to strike out at a God who does not defend Himself, or so it would seem.

But you see, God didn't make the brakes fail on the truck that killed two young twin girls and their mother. God does not point a finger down from heaven and say, "You will die" while someone else is allowed to live. For our God is a God of healing, of love, and of peace. Blaming God for deaths, accidents, or catastrophes is to miss the point.

I have heard it said that a faith that only believes in God during the good times is a shallow faith indeed, and is easily shattered. But those are not the only faiths to break. Even Jesus Himself in His darkest hour of despair cried out, "My God, my God, why have forsaken me?"

When we hurt, we hurt. And sometimes we give in to our instincts, lashing out at those we love. And what better target than the One we call the Almighty, but who seems very sparing in the use of divine power. We think that an all-loving God should not have let things happen, and therefore is at fault.

If only we would, or could, open up in our despair, instead of closing in and locking in the pain and the anger. Even in the worst of times, *especially* in the worst of times, God's hand is present - in our family, our friends, our church - and in the act of Communion. In fact, in the act of gathering around the table to share the bread and the cup, God has given us a built-in support system within the church - a community that visibly becomes a fellowship during the act of breaking bread together.

It is only through this fellowship that the promise of God to provide as much strength as is necessary to bear any burden and defeat any temptation becomes real. We cannot do it alone. We cannot go it alone. That is what the body of believers is here for. Because if pushed far enough, every individual has a breaking point; but if we band together in the face of adversity, then we will find that Jesus' promise that wherever two or three are gathered together, then God is in our midst, is indeed not an idle promise or an empty phrase, but a living reality.

How strong can your faith be? Can it face any difficulty? If any of us are in any doubt, maybe it would be a good idea to be reminded about what faith really is.

Faith is not 'feeling good' about God. Faith is a conscious choice to obey God when He says "Trust me." Because faith is an ACT, not a 'mood.' Real faith holds on to the character of God and rests in the assurance that circumstances, even the most horrible circumstances we can imagine, cannot change God.

And faith acknowledges that the love of God is not something we can deduce from the evidence around us. Things are a mess. People do suffer. Life isn't fair. But in the face of reality, the really tough question is not "Why do bad things happen?" The tougher question is, "What is our response in the face of adversity?"

Some, like Job's wife, want to curl up, and in a final fit, admonish all who will listen to "Curse God and Die." That is one alternative. But where does that get us?

Others, like some of the New England Yankees among us, seek to soldier on alone, in silence and solitude, until they simply cannot bear it any longer. They live the motto on the bumper sticker that says: "Life is Hard, and then You Die."

But for others, there is a third option: to band together to ask probing questions, to puzzle out some possible answers, to find strength in each other, and to face the world knowing that none other than the spirit of Jesus of Nazareth is on our side.

The choice is ours to make, and ours alone. But remember, life is fragile. Handle that gift from God with great care. And may we be sustained by the grace of God, as we continue our pilgrimage of faith to the goal that God has in mind for us.

Let us pray: