

“The Word Is Near”

“The word is near you” (Romans 10:8).

Have you ever felt abandoned by God? Have you ever thought that God didn’t care about you? Maybe you’ve felt as though God were punishing you for some secret sin, or maybe you have been distracted by the cares and fears of life and found yourself far from the God who once seemed so near. If you can answer “yes” to any of these scenarios, then you can identify with Job. Job was a man referred to in Scripture as “blameless and upright...who feared God and shunned evil” (Job 1:1). As the book of Job opens, we find a curious conversation between God and Satan where the devil challenges God by stating that Job’s faithfulness was simply a result of the material abundance God had showered on Job, and that if this hedge of blessing was removed, Job would quickly curse God. In response to Satan’s challenge, the Lord gave him permission to torment Job, saying, “Behold, all that he has is in your hand.” In the verses that follow, we hear a litany of suffering that is hard to stomach as Job loses his livestock and servants to invasion and fire, his house is destroyed by “a mighty wind,” and, if this wasn’t terrible enough, Job is then told that his sons and daughters also died in the disaster.

Over the next 30 chapters, we hear an ongoing dialogue between the grieving Job and three of his friends as each offers deeply flawed opinions about Job’s suffering. As this damning discourse draws to a close, Job cries out with a heartbreaking response, “Oh, that I were...in the days when God watched over me, when his lamp shone upon my head, and by his light I walked through darkness...when the friendship of God was upon my tent, when the Almighty was yet with me, when my children were all around me...and the rock poured out for me streams of oil” (Job 29:2-6). And in one final pained protest to God, Job cried out, “Oh, that I had one to hear! Here is my signature! Let the Almighty answer me!” (Job 31:35). In these wounded words, Job’s despair is impossible to ignore, and even though he never curses God, his grief is overwhelming, and his feelings of abandonment are quite clear. Job feels that God has left him and demands a response. And then comes today’s reading.

In chapter 38, God answers Job out of the whirlwind, and you can almost hear the rumble of thunder in His voice as he bellows, “Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me” (Job 38:2-3 NIV). In the chapters that follow, God proclaims His supremacy, and He details His ever-present influence on His creation, from providing “food for the raven” to stirring “the sea like a pot of ointment” (Job 41:31 NIV). Then, finally, after several chapters declaring His power and presence, God concludes His great sermon to Job with the proclamation that “Nothing on earth is his equal” (Job 41:33 NIV).

God’s brash response to Job seems harsh, but God’s words of rebuke do so much more than simply scold Job’s resignation. In God’s response from the storm, Job is reminded that He who “laid the earth’s foundation” and He who controls the seas and stars – the all-powerful, all-knowing God of the universe – is also intimately concerned with and involved in Job’s life. And in His words to Job, God demonstrates that He hasn’t gone away, that He hasn’t turned His back on Job’s suffering, and that nothing can ever remove Job from God’s sovereign reach.

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If you can answer “yes” to any of these scenarios, then you can identify with the disciple Peter in today’s reading from Matthew. As Peter steps out of the boat to meet Jesus on the water, the wind begins to howl in his ears, and waves begin to lick his face, and, distracted by these terrifying circumstances, Peter begins to sink to his death. In an act of utter desperation, Peter cries out to Jesus, “Lord, save me.” And we are told that “Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him,” saying to Peter, “You of little faith...why did you doubt?” And, Matthew writes, “And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’” (Matthew 14:30-31).

In this miraculous story, we once again see a great Biblical character, battered and baffled by life’s circumstances, only to be reassured in a very personal way that God is in control and that in God’s hands our lives are tightly held. The stories from today’s readings resonate with us because the truth is that in one way or another, we have all felt abandoned by God. We have all harbored thoughts that God didn’t care, and in moments of desperation we have all presumed that we were being punished by God. At some point, the cares and fears of this life have caused us all to take our eyes off Jesus, and at times in our lives we have all felt far away from the God who once seemed so near.

These deceptive emotions are a result of sin. And whether we feel separation and isolation, or anxiety and despair, the realities of the sin in this world and in our lives have caused us to doubt God’s love. Like Job, we have called into question God’s eternal promises and, like Peter, we have allowed the difficulties of life to obscure God’s presence, and the end result is that just when we needed him most, we have walked away from God.

But God has never and will never walk away from us. That’s what we see in today’s readings. Instead of writing Job off and letting him go his own way, He meets him face to face and boldly brings Him back to faith. Instead of letting Peter sink into the water, the Lord reaches down and saves him. And instead of allowing us to retreat into isolation and eternal death, God sent His Son to experience the abandonment of His Father and receive the punishment our secret sins deserved. On Him was placed the destructive distractions of a thousand generations, and as He hung on the Cross gasping for His last breath, Jesus prayed, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). And He did this all for you.

Because of this ultimate and perfect act of love, we can be sure that God will never leave us, and today, we can proclaim with Paul that the “Word is near” (Romans 10:8). You see, God has not and will never remove Himself from you. In Christ, you have been forgiven, the separation of sin has been destroyed, you have a relationship with God, and your future in heaven is secure.

And this matters, because we live in a world where we are surrounded by people who feel abandoned by God; who think that God doesn’t care; who feel as though God is punishing them. We live in a world where so many are distracted by the cares and fears of life, and so many more find themselves far from the God who once seemed so near. And in this world of sin and separation, of alienation and despair, we have a message of life for them and we can bring them hope in the good news that the God who “laid the foundations of earth” and gives food to ravens, who stood by Job in the face of his suffering and who reached out His hand to pull Peter from the raging waters; this same God stretched out His arms on the Cross to save us from sin and rose from the grave to free us from death, and in this God we have life. “The word of the Lord is near.” The word of the Lord is here. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God’s people say, “Amen.”

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