

SPIRIT OF COMPASSION
Randall Tremba
October 25, 2015
30th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

* * *

Job 42:1-17

After this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children's children, four generations. And Job died, old and full of days.

Mark 10:46-52

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside.

* * *

Once upon a time a blind beggar named Bartimaeus sat in the dust alongside the Jericho road, the way we sometimes sit stuck in our own despair as our world turns ever more grim. We see no way out. We see no future. We see only darkness.

Bartimaeus could see no way out. And then something happened.

Jesus passed his way. He could feel it in the air. *Jesus, have mercy on me*, he cried out. The crowd tried to silence his voice. But he cried all the more: *Jesus, have mercy on me*.

Bartimaeus may have been poor and blind. He may have been of no count. He may have had no standing in that society. He may have been stuck in despair. But he believed in the spirit of compassion. He could sense it in his bones. The world may be cruel but in this world there is a spirit of compassion ready to be tapped.

It's hard to believe at certain times. It's impossible to prove. But there are clues if only we can see.

Bartimaeus cried out.

And Jesus heard his cry the way we hear, the way we hear the cries of refugees crammed in flimsy boats. The way we hear migrants crying at border crossings and in crowded camps. The way we hear the poor, the wounded, the addicted, the homeless, the ravaged, the raped, enslaved, forsaken and forgotten, crying out for mercy—not just on the other side of the world but in our own small worlds close at hand.

We hear them all. We hear them all, the hungry wandering in the wilderness crying out for bread. Crying out for mercy.

Most every evening, after my 30 minutes with Fox News, I watch the PBS News Hour. And when the updates on the migrant crisis come up, I want to close my eyes and stop my ears.

Be quiet, I scream silently. Leave me alone. I can't help! The suffering is too great!

And then comes that haunting question: *Why do bad things happen to good people?* It's an old question.

Soon after the human species arose out of the animal world, it was haunted by that question. It was a nagging question long before organized religions arose with pat orthodox answers.

Are the mysterious powers in or behind this terribly beautiful world benevolent, malevolent or just plain indifferent? And the same might be asked of our own mysterious human powers. What are we like?

Why do bad things happen to good people, or for that matter, why do bad things happen at all? Is it a question just for God or must it be asked of us as well?

It's a question played out in one of the oldest known human stage plays, a drama we know in our tradition as Job. It's a work of fiction conveying an existential insight and it's the lesson this morning from the Old Testament.

Here's how the play begins. Scene 1. The narrator stands center stage.

Once upon a time there was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright. He revered God and turned away from evil. He had seven sons and three daughters. He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and many servants. This man was the greatest of all the people of the East.

That's scene 1. And then comes scene 2.

Following a series of inexplicable disasters Job has lost everything—his children, his wealth, his health. Little did he know he was a victim of a wager between God and Satan. Remember: this is a stage play and the wager was over Job's head, high above the lower stage where Job lived.

Job was stunned. He sat down on a pile of ashes and groaned like Bartimaeus beside the Jericho road, diminished, defeated, downhearted.

Job's friends came to console him with theological explanations. With long and windy speeches, they all basically said, *Job deserved what befell him*. He was guilty. The Holy One was punishing Job for something whether he knew it or not, whether he admitted it or not. That, by the way, is still a common, superstitious view of God—a stern Judge who punishes and condemns.

Job would have none of that. He was unbowed and demanded a confrontation with God.

Well, it takes many scenes and long speeches to get there but eventually the Holy One appears in a whirlwind—cue the sound effects and smoke machine: *Who are you to complain, bellows the Holy One at Job? Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth and created Leviathan to romp in the bottomless seas? Who are you to question me?*

And that, by the way, is how the mighty, the wealthy and privileged elite in all societies speak. It's an attempt to silence the aggrieved. Be quiet, they said to Bartimaeus. It's a classic power play. But Job does not relent. Nor must we.

For, you see, Job believed that the Holy One in whose image we are made is also made in our image and that means the compassion in our hearts is in the heart of the Holy One as well. Job calls God's bluff.

And then comes the final scene. Health, wealth and children are fully restored to Job. It's a glimpse of what we call restorative justice. And it's within our power to practice it. Theology and anthropology are two sides of one coin.

After health, wealth and children are restored to Job, the narrator walks to center stage and addresses the announce:

In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job's daughters; their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers. After this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children's children, four generations in all. And Job died, old and full of days.

And the curtain comes down. End of play.

It's a Hollywood ending before Hollywood. But don't be fooled. It's not gratuitous. It's a hard-earned answer to the cruelty of the world. The story of Job is an existential claim of faith: In this sometimes cruel world and in our sometimes cold hearts there is really and truly a deep and abiding spirit of compassion waiting to be tapped.

No, we can't explain suffering and evil with pat answers. But we can answer suffering and evil with mercy. No, we can't do everything, but we can always do something.

And so we give up some of our precious, hard earned money, place it in our Peacemaking Offering and send it to our Presbyterian partners in Europe to assist refugees. It's not everything, but it's something. It's mercy at work.

Our children assemble school kits for migrant children and send them to Church World Service to distribute in the camps. It's not everything, but it's something. It's mercy at work.

A small group of us put our heads together to see if we might find a way to resettle a Syrian family or two in our area. We pledge our time, skills and resources. It's not everything, but it's something. It's mercy at work.

Lord, have mercy, Bartimaeus cried.

Jesus stood still and said, *Call him to me.* They called out to the blind beggar, *Take heart; get up, Jesus is calling you.* Not unlike the way Jesus even now is calling us, calling you. *Come unto me. Come unto me all you who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest.*

Bartimaeus threw off his cloak, sprang to his feet and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said, *What do you want me to do for you? Let me see again,* he answered. *Go your way,* said Jesus. *Your faith—which is to say, your trust in the spirit of compassion—has made you well.*

And then comes the final scene. Bartimaeus regained his sight, his vision was restored and he followed Jesus, the Merciful One, on the way.

And that's the way we, too, can walk. We can walk closer and closer with Jesus, the Merciful One, now and throughout all our days.