

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

He was really angry with God. He had raised two sons, both outstanding kids - good students, polite and personable - but the older one especially, he was the kind of kid who doesn't come around very often - a gifted musician, outgoing, a believer, a good public speaker, heart of charity, loving to his parents, a model to his younger brother - the kind of kid who made other parents jealous that he wasn't their son. Everyone had dreams for a job he could do, but he had his own dream: singing country. He moved to Nashville for college. He visited home one spring day, and on his way back encountered a thunderous rain storm in St. Louis. On the interstate his wheels started spinning and the car slid. He lost control, flipped over and crashed. His parents got the message no parent wants to receive: "Your son is dead." "Dead?" they wondered. "It can't be." But it was. Their grief was immense, but especially the father. He was really angry with God.

Some people experience an event that completely shatters their faith. They were strong believers in their youth. They went to church, served mass, sang in the choir, helped at funeral dinners, and made great friends. But then something happened. They met new friends who thought church was irrelevant. Their spouse cheated on them. They couldn't shake an addiction. They lost a child. All of a sudden, everything they thought they knew about God was wrong. It just dried up on them. Their strong faith collapsed like the twin towers, and all their security crashed into rubble. Sometimes people say, "I lost my faith." Well, it's not always a bad thing.

I don't recommend it to anyone, but a life-changing event can change one's faith for the better. Sometimes the faith we held as children clung to a false God who rescues from all danger, heals all ills, and does our will. Sometimes we envision God as a kind of genie in a bottle. We rub the sides with the right incantation, and the genie pops out to grant our wishes. When it doesn't happen, some people give up on God. I would too because that God doesn't seem to be the God we have. We have instead a God who created the world with considerable care, beauty, and love, but also a world where people with free will can make the wrong choice, or where nature creates havoc. God did not create a world devoid of tragedy, but one that includes it. It makes us treasure what we have as long as we can. If you were God, maybe you would do it differently. But you're not.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God says, "my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways.... As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts." We have a God who is far more mysterious than we have ever imagined, one who does not fear tragedy, but overcomes it.

Some people have legitimate complaints. They don't like the way other people get paid; a wife hears her husband say, "I never loved you;" a man is imprisoned for a crime he never committed; a parent loses a talented kid alone among skid marks on a dark rainy night. Perhaps Isaiah knew that faith can be difficult, beautiful, or awkward. He gives this advice: "Seek the Lord while he may be found, call him while he is near" because we will all go through times when the Lord cannot be found, and when he does not feel near. Sometimes we are looking in the wrong place, or we are seeking the wrong Lord.

Sunday, September 24, 2017