

Today's first reading is one of the most depressing passages in the bible. Literally. The guy seems to be saying, "You think you got problems. I got problems."

The reading comes from the Book of Job. Job is an upright farmer with a good family, and he constantly praises God. Satan tells God Job is faithful only because he leads a charmed life. God disagrees and permits Satan to torment Job to prove how good Job is. All hell breaks loose. Enemies attack and kill Job's cows, sheep, camels and servants. The wind collapses the house where his family is dining and kills all his children. Job himself is inflicted with sores from head to toe. Through it all, though, Job remains firm. He says philosophically to his wife, "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God and not receive the bad?"

Job next discusses the situation with his friends. They believe, as Job always had, that God rewards those who do good and punishes those who do evil. The friends say if Job has all this punishment, he must have done something evil. Job says no. He is blameless. But if that is true, the conversation continues, then God is not good. The Book of Job fearlessly penetrates these big questions: Why does suffering happen to people who don't deserve it? And why does God do nothing about it?

At the end of the book, God breaks the silence and talks to Job. Job experiences the presence of God. God tells Job that the mysteries of the universe are too great for him to comprehend. And Job, resolute in his own goodness, finally puts his trust in God, whatever that may bring.

The book answers the question of undeserved suffering in this way: God is good, but God is mysterious, and all we can do is trust.

The verses we hear today come from early in the book, as Job is taking stock of his situation. He compares his life to that of a slave who gets nothing: no salary, no shade. He has been miserable for months. He cannot sleep at night. His days are slipping away one by one, and he has no hope for change. "My life is like the wind," he says. "I shall not see happiness again." The gospel tells about the healing power of Christ, but in this first reading, we hear a naked lament from a man with a hard, hard life.

Bad news can happen to anybody. It is harder to take when we can't figure out why it happens. When bad things happen to good people, the unpredictability of life adds more burden to our sufferings. In Christ, God invites us to trust that we can still find mercy and comfort. Suffering doesn't mean God's love is gone; it means that God's mercy is yet to be revealed.