A WORLD OF HURT

The weather forecast called for patchy fog. I packed my camera and tripod in the trunk of my car, then set off for my early-morning workout at the Y. This was several years ago. My plan was to stop off at Harbor Park. If conditions were right, I hoped to get some shots of sun and fog on the Connecticut River. However, when I got there, traffic cones blocked the entrance. There were emergency vehicles parked in the lot. The entrance to the Wesleyan boathouse next door was open. But I saw several TV news trucks had pulled up there. One crew was doing a setup by the water's edge.

I abandoned any thought of taking pictures and continued on to the Y. *This can't be good*, I remember thinking. It wasn't. A short while later I was working out on a treadmill at the Y when the story was broadcast on the TV monitor mounted on the wall. A local man had jumped from the Arrigoni Bridge the night before. He survived in critical condition, but his seven-month-old son was missing. Police divers were now searching the river. There were audible gasps and groans from my fellow exercisers.

The news only got worse as details emerged over the next few days. The man was estranged from his wife. He had called his mother from the bridge shortly before he jumped. "Just tell everyone I'm sorry," he said. She could hear her grandson crying in the background. She raced to the scene with another son. They arrived just before the police, who had been alerted by her frantic 9-1-1 call. She got there in time to see her son climb over the bridge railing and plunge 90 feet to the river below. Her grandson's stroller was found nearby, empty. A canoeist discovered the child's body two days later near the Haddam bridge 15 miles downstream.

The writer Oscar Wilde once recalled telling a friend that there was enough suffering in one narrow London lane to show that God did not love man. Wilde went on to suggest that “wherever there was any sorrow, though but that of a child, in some little garden weeping over a fault that it had or had not committed, the whole face of creation was completely marred.” One can only imagine how the face of creation is marred when an innocent child is tossed from a bridge by a deranged father.

Theologians are much exercised about the “problem of evil,” especially evil that inflicts suffering upon the innocent. Some have acknowledged that evil is only a problem once you bring God into it. If there were no God, there would no problem – at least none that requires you to reconcile evil with God’s existence. If you start with the proposition that God loves his own, then you’re forced to consider why the innocent have been made to suffer.

The Book of Job — the source of our Old Testament reading this morning — is not a work for those seeking easy answers to the problem of evil and suffering. According to the story, Job is a “blameless and upright man,” which proves to be his undoing. God dangles this fact in front of Satan, who counters that Job is faithful only because he is obviously God’s fair-haired boy. “But put forth thy hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse thee to thy face," Satan taunts. God unaccountably agrees to this proposition and invites Satan to do his worst.

In swift succession, Satan strips Job of every worldly possession, including his sons and daughters, with God looking the other way. Job's suffering is like hot metal hammered against the anvil of God's silence. His tears, his pleading, his soul-searching, his outrage -- all are just more empty clanging as the hammer blows rain down. When touching all that Job has proves insufficient, Satan secures God's permission to attack his person. The hapless Job winds up sitting on an ash heap covered with sores. Job's wife urges him to curse God and die.

The hammer-blows of misfortune that rain down upon him are grievous but swiftly delivered. They take up only the first two of more than 40 excruciating chapters. At first Job appears resigned to his fate. He never disputes God's right to have his way with him. After losing everything he has, Job declares, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

But then he begins to ask himself, in effect, "Why me?" It doesn't help that his so-called friends now begin piling on, blaming the victim for his misfortune. But Job knows he has done nothing to deserve the afflictions that have befallen him. Although he recognizes that God can do with him as he pleases, Job feels he is at least owed an explanation. This is never forthcoming.

God eventually condescends to speak to him out of the whirlwind, only to rebuke him for his presumption. "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" the Lord thunders. Poor Job is reduced to the role of a supplicant in the court of the Great and Terrible Oz. "I have uttered what I did not understand," he says meekly; "things too wonderful for me, which I did not know."

God's refusal to explain himself has not deterred theologians from doing so on his behalf. Many seem to think that free will only has meaning if human beings can freely inflict mayhem on one another. I suspect such formulations might ring hollow to the mother of a seven-month-old child who has been thrown from a bridge by her estranged husband. And never mind the countless other victims of domestic violence, rape, murder, persecutions, purges, pogroms, wars and genocide throughout history.

In the absence of any clear explanation, we are often tempted to supply our own, with decidedly mixed results. There are those, like Job's friends, who blame the victims for the calamities that befall them. If Job suffered, it was obviously because he had done something to offend the Lord. Has there ever been a TV evangelist who could resist the temptation to blame the victims for the devastation caused by some natural disaster? The Book of Job itself suggests Job was made to suffer to test him, another standard explanation. Then there are those who simply throw up their hands in the face of affliction and say all will be made right in the sweet bye-and-bye.

Does God suffer along with humanity? The Lord was not indifferent to the sufferings of his people when they were slaves in Egypt. He later grieved for the waywardness of the nation of Israel. Based on his reading of the Old Testament prophets, the Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel agued that "the most exalted idea applied to God is not infinite wisdom, infinite power, but infinite concern." The New Testament introduces the view of God simultaneously as a Son who suffers death on a cross and as a Father who suffers the death of his Son.

The idea of a suffering God has steadily gained ground over the last century, especially after the Holocaust in Europe. A leading proponent was German theologian Jürgen Moltmann. He had been a prisoner of war after fighting for Germany and was deeply affected by the discovery of the Nazi death camps. For him, the notion of a loving God who is aloof from the sufferings of those he loves made no sense. He wrote, “The only credible theology for Auschwitz is one that makes God an inmate of the place.”

As a 15-year-old inmate at Auschwitz, author and Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel had been witness to the hanging of three camp inmates, one of them a young boy with the face of a sad angel. The child weighed so little that the fall did not break his neck. He died an agonizing death on the end of the rope as the entire camp was made to watch. "Where is God now?" one of the onlookers demanded bitterly. Wiesel heard a voice within himself answer: "Where is He? Here He is -- He is hanging here on this gallows.”

The meaning of the Incarnation comes down to this: God willingly takes everything upon himself. Everything. The flesh-and-blood Son of God even allows himself to be forsaken by his Father. This enables him to say to everyone — everyone, “As you have done it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have done it to me.”

# # #