

I once knew a man named Frank. Frank was a hardened man. Hardened physically. Hardened emotionally. And, perhaps, a bit hardened spiritually. I met Frank on vicarage. He was 92 years old. A WWII veteran who fought Rommel in the deserts of North Africa and then later became a radio officer on transport planes flying over fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. And every time I met with Frank, I heard more of the glorious war stories that turned him into a larger than life hero.

Yet that heroic, hardened physical presence was also weary as well. Frank's wife had passed away two years before. He was estranged from his only daughter. He had no friends that I knew of. He spent his days living alone with his only companion: a blind and deaf 17-year-old Dalmatian.

Frank was still able to walk, and still able to drive, but he was on our list of shut-in members. It wasn't because he couldn't get to church. It was because he just didn't leave his home anymore.

More than once on vicarage, Frank gave me a new perspective into the story of Job. Job wasn't a war hero, but he was certainly an imposing figure of his day. Fantastically wealthy and well respected. A man with land and houses and businesses and money and cars and every other luxury we can imagine.

He had ten children whom he loved dearly. Children he prayed for. Sons and daughters that he did everything in his power to make sure were happy and safe. Job had everything. And by every human standard, he had earned it. He worked hard for his wealth. He raised his children right. He went to church every Sunday and he prayed every evening.

And it was all stripped away from him. First his wealth. The money he had so carefully invested year after year. Gone. Then his property. All the land he had struggled to cultivate and develop. Destroyed. Finally, the family business. The company he had spent an entire lifetime prudently managing until it was the most respected in the region. Crumbling before his very eyes.

Destitute and bewildered, things went from bad to worse for Job. His children, those beloved children, were gathered together in the home that Job had built for them. He built that home to protect them. To provide for them. To give them the best that years of hard work could offer.

But it wasn't enough. It wasn't enough to stop the storm. It wasn't enough to protect them as a tornado ripped through the building. Job had built that house to be their home. And instead it became their grave.

No, I think it's hard to imagine Job's loss until you've seen a portion of it in someone else's life. Until you've seen it, maybe, in your own life. When I saw that kind of loss in Frank's life, I gained a whole new picture of Job.

Hardened. Weary. The kind of man who can go to the funeral of his own children and simply say, "I came into this world with nothing. I'll leave this world with nothing. The Lord gave. And the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

The trials weren't over for either man, however. Neither Job, nor Frank. Both were about to suffer more pain, this time not emotionally, but physically. For Job, it was a skin disease, a rash that left painful, itching, bleeding sores all over his body. And for Frank? It was a shattered hip.

How much more could these two men endure? How much more could any man endure? If life becomes nothing more than pain and heartache, when do you give up on hoping that God will give you anything good ever again?

This was the question rolling around in my mind as I drove up to the hospital and headed down the hallway toward Frank's room. He was out of surgery and awake when I sat down next to his bed. We had developed a pretty good rapport by this point and at first I just sat there shaking my head.

“Frank,” I said, “How did you manage to do this?” “I don’t know.” He replied. “I just went out to get the mail.”

“Yeah...” He said, “I think its time I get out of that old house.” We both breathed a heavy sigh. Frank had never, ever, suggested leaving that house. That was the house he had spent most of his marriage in. The house he had raised his daughter in. I couldn’t even imagine the level of suffering and resignation it took for him to suggest that.

I did the best I could to comfort Frank. But, truth be told, I didn’t have the answers he wanted, any more than Job’s friends had the answers that he wanted. And it frustrated Job to no end. He refused to give up on God. But he could not understand how God could stand by and watch his life fall apart. Desperate and alone in his pain, he dropped to his knees, pleading with God for answers. “What have I done wrong? Why are these things happening? Where are you God? Answer me!”

And God answered. In the midst of an enormous windstorm, God comes to Job. And He offers Job the words of our Old Testament lesson. Which basically amount to Him saying, “I am God, and you are not. I created this world. I made the land. I made the sea. I made the trees and the animals and the wind and the rain. I made you! And I don’t owe you any answers!”

It wasn’t the answer that Job expected, I imagine. It certainly isn’t the answer that we expect. Is that really all the comfort that God offers us? “I’m the boss. I know what I’m doing.” Well... yes and no. It is indeed all that God offers Job, but there’s a lot more compassion in those seemingly harsh words than you might think.

And this was something that Frank would teach me the next time I visited him. He was in noticeably better spirits that day. Part of it was probably due to his recovery. He had started rehab on the new hip and the doctors were optimistic about his prognosis.

Part of it was probably emotional. Another WWII vet in the congregation, who himself was recovering from ankle surgery down the hall, had finally made it over to see Frank. But I think there was a spiritual aspect as well. Because as I sat down next to his bed, we hadn’t even begun to chitchat when Frank pointed to my little communion box on the table.

“You brought it with you?” He asked. I was a little confused. I always served Frank communion, always at end of our visits. It was never a big deal to him.

“Yeah, I brought it. Why? Would you like it now?” Frank nodded and actually smiled.

“I’ll take anything that’ll help right now.” I have to admit, at the time I didn’t know what to make of that comment. Part of me almost wanted to be angry with him. How dare he toss communion in as just another treatment for his injury? As if you could put the body and blood of Christ alongside of IV’s and oxygen tanks.

But I pushed aside my doubts, held my tongue, and served him the Lord’s Supper that day. And I’m rather glad I did. Because five days later, Frank threw a blood clot from the surgery and died quite suddenly of a stroke.

I thought about those words that Frank spoke to me in the weeks after his death. Looking over at me and saying with such confidence, “I’ll take anything that’ll help right now.” And then I imagined Frank looking up to heaven that morning and saying with weakness and humility, “I’ll take anything that’ll help right now.”

And you know, God could have looked down and said, “I’m the creator of heaven and earth and I don’t owe you anything.” He could have looked down and said, “Alright, I’ll heal your hip and give you another few years of loneliness and suffering.” But he didn’t do either one. Instead, God looked down and said, “OK, I’ll give you my Son.”

We want answers. We want to know what God is doing and why He is doing it and what the end result will be for us. We want the answers of an almighty God. But what we receive is the love of an almighty God. The God who made the land and sea and all creation turns to us and says, “I don’t owe you any answers, but I will still use all of my strength to give you hope.”

The God who made us – who fashioned us in our mother’s womb, who knows every hair on our head and every beat of our heart, the God who created us – is continually working to recreate us. In spirit and in body. So that on the last day we can stand upon this earth without painful sores or shattered hips.

Frank put the sacrament alongside IV’s and oxygen tanks, and he was absolutely right to do so. Because while all those pieces of medical equipment were doing their part to save his mortal body, our almighty God was doing all He could through the body and blood of his Son to give Frank an immortal body. To give Frank more than answers. To give him eternal life.

The Biblical book of Job ends with a celebration. God restores Job’s health, gives him back twice as much wealth as he lost, and gives him ten more children. Sounds like a happy ending. And it is.

But you know, I think Job knew all along that there would be a happy ending to his story. Oh, he didn’t know anything about the healing of his wounds, or the return of his wealth, or the birth of his sons and daughters. But even in his frustration and anger towards God, he knew that he wasn’t abandoned. That the Creator has a plan for His creation.

And so it’s in the very midst of suffering and grief that Job proclaims, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and on the last day He will stand upon the earth. And even after my skin has been destroyed, I know in my flesh I will see God.”

We know that our Redeemer lives. And in the face of death itself, He lives that we also may live. That is the happy ending for Job. That is the happy ending for Frank. And that is the happy ending for each and every one us. Amen.