

*Jesus: The Ultimate Empathizer*  
*Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Mark 10:17-31; Hebrews 4:12-16*  
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We're born, we live, and then we die. In the midst of life there are moments of joy and celebration as well as moments of terror and challenges. When life poses these challenges, when we are faced with crises, pain, suffering, and death, how do we cope? Who do we turn to? Who do we blame? We wonder, "Did we do something to deserve it?" Are we being punished? Is there anyone who understands? Is there anyone who stands beside us during these times?

Living in this world has its challenges. Everything can be going well. We have all that we need and then some. We can have both security and comfort. We can be enjoying life to the max, and then smack out of nowhere, there is a phone call, a knock on the door, a text message, a doctor's appointment in which it seems like the rug has been pulled out from under us and we feel like we are falling into a dark and bottomless pit. We scream out, "Why? Where are you, God?" Can you identify? Have you been there? I have. For me it wasn't a cancer diagnosis. I knew I was in a win-win situation. If I was healed of cancer, I won. If I lost the battle, I won the best prize-to live eternally with God. However, the unknown part of cancer was just how much suffering there can be before a win. And that can be like falling into a bottomless, dark pit. No, my dark pit occurred when I was a child. Experiencing my parents' very painful and public divorce at the age of three when I didn't have the cognitive, spiritual, or emotional resources to draw upon, felt like a free fall through darkness into the emptiness. I didn't know how to cry out to God. I just cried and cried and cried because my world had come to an end. Have you been there? If you haven't listen to these words, so when you are there, you know there is One who understands and in whom you can trust.

Experiencing this depth of pain at any age will change one's life. Some will seek God and the experience will deepen their faith. While others will curse God and turn away. As a pastor, I have been called to be with those in the midst of their crisis, to stand with them in their moments of disbelief and denial, to hold their hands as they step into the reality of the situation and face the terror in front of them. I have heard their cries of, "Where are you God? Have you abandoned us?" Sometimes well-meaning people like Job's friends will blame and accuse, "You must have done something wrong! God is punishing you." Job argues that he hasn't done anything wrong. He has been faithful to God in every way. Job wants to present his case before God like a defendant in court. Job has the confidence that God would not bully him, make fun of him, or even use force against him. Job has confidence that God will listen and be merciful. What faith! Would we have such faith in God's mercy?

The letter to the Hebrews points to God's mercy in Jesus, to God understanding our human weakness and struggles because God entered into our human experience in Jesus, our Emmanuel, God-with-us. Jesus empathizes with us. Jesus is the presence of God in our human experience. Hebrews eloquently describes Jesus as the great high priest, the "go between" us and God. Jesus understands everything that we go through because he has experienced it. He has experienced joy, love, temptation, rejection, pain, and the free fall through darkness into the emptiness when he was crucified and cried out, "My God, Why?" Jesus is our great empathizer. He doesn't blame. He doesn't punish. Jesus listens without judging, without being critical. Jesus enters into our situation. Jesus stands with us and participates with us. That is what empathy means- to listen and feel what the other person is feeling, to be with the person and experience what the person is experiencing. There is nothing more healing and validating for the one in the free fall than to know that someone is there falling with them. Imagine jumping out of an airplane without a parachute. Then someone with a parachute jumps out and finds a way to come along side you, grab your hand, and bring you in for a safe landing. That's what Jesus

does for us. No matter what we are going through. We can be on death row, facing execution or standing before a judge in traffic court. We can be grieving a loss of a loved one or a pet. We can be suffering from a physical or a mental illness. Or we can be realizing how we harmed another because of our sin. No matter what, Jesus comes along side and stays with us. I find that so comforting. And Jesus also calls us to come along side others who are in the free fall and be like Jesus to them. When my parents were going through the divorce and I was freefalling, Jesus showed up in the form of my grandmother. Her big soft arms held me tight as I grieved the loss of my family. An ancient church leader of the second century, Ireneaus said, “Jesus became what we are, in order that we might become what he is.”

Jesus calls many to become what he is, but not all follow as we see in the Gospel lesson. The man of who has everything: wealth, influence, and power. He has everything but one thing, so he asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Notice he doesn’t ask, “How can I inherit eternal life?” but what must *I* do? He thinks it is something he can do. How does Jesus respond even before he answers the man? Jesus looks the man in the eye and loves him. Jesus looks into this man’s soul. He knows him. Jesus empathizes with this man. Jesus understands that this man wants it all. When the tempter told Jesus that he could have it all, if he worshiped the tempter. Jesus responded by stating, “Worship God and serve God only.” So Jesus knows this man has not come to him to worship and serve God, to become an empathizer. When Jesus looked into this man’s eyes he saw that his trust and pride rested in his possessions and power. They blocked his ability to trust in God for his security and comfort. Jesus listened to the question and saw into the man’s soul. He entered into this man’s life and challenges him to trust only in God by commanding him to “Give away your wealth to the poor.” Jesus was offering the man the possibility to put his whole faith and trust in God and allow his life to be changed. But the man wouldn’t let go of his security blanket of wealth, influence, and power. And allow God to transform him into one who can listen, walk along side others, leading them to put their whole trust in God. Is there anything that blocks you from trusting God with your life and all that you own?

Trusting in God with our whole lives is a process like one step forward and two steps backward. We say we trust and then something happens and we grab for anything to hold onto to stop the free fall. We forget that Jesus is there with us, empathizing, and offering us his hand. Today we are celebrating a baptism. In the Methodist tradition baptism is a covenant between God and us. In this Covenant we pledge that we will put our whole trust in the grace Jesus offers us and we will serve him as our Lord and Savior. God’s part of the covenant is to claim us as God’s own and never let us go. God pours out God’s Spirit on us like we pour water into a bowl. God never breaks God’s covenant with us. God is the covenant keeper. However, we are not faithful covenant keepers. We keep a portion of our heart to love something other than God. We break God’s law. We do not put our whole trust in God. We give into evil. And we do not love our neighbors. Jesus, the great empathizer, understands because he has walked in our shoes and experienced our lives. Jesus, the great high priest, great go-between, takes us by the hand and goes with us as we approach the throne of God and pleads for grace and mercy. Then we are given a new possibility to let go yet again, and let God, to put our whole trust in God to walk with us every day.

**Reflection Questions:** Is there any reason why you do not put your entire trust in God? What blocks you from doing so? What would your life be like if you did?

**Resources:** *Feasting on the Word*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors; “Empathy and the New Testament” by L. Ann Jervis, <http://www.mcmaster.ca/mjtm/newpage6.htm>

One of the formal ways we approach the throne of God is by renewing our baptismal covenant, remaking this covenant with the One who never breaks it. God always claims us no matter how many times we break this covenant.