

Liturgical Readings for the Sundays of February 2018 – Cycle B

Introduction: Anxiety: Dead End or Revolving Door?

We live in anxious times. But when was the human race ever living in other than anxious times? History books of recent records and such as reach back thousands of years are full of troubled times, wars, plagues, rebellions along with early mortality, diseases, pain . . . Even the Bible, which promises a positive outcome to life, has its moods.

For example, from the *Book of Ecclesiastes* we hear:

Nothing is new under the sun . . . I applied my mind to search and investigate . . . A bad business God has given to human beings . . . I have seen all things that are done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a chase after wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and you cannot [calculate] what is not there. Though I said to myself, “See, I have greatly increased my wisdom beyond all who were before me . . . yet when I applied my mind to know wisdom and knowledge, madness and folly, I learned that this also is a chase after wind. For in much wisdom there is much sorrow; whoever increases knowledge increases grief . . . For the lot of mortals and the lot of beasts is the same lot: . . . Both were made from dust, and to dust they both return.

And I love this quote about old age – which I can testify to since I am old:

Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come . . . when the guardians of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent; when the women who grind are idle because they are few, and those who look through the windows grow blind; when the doors to the street are shut, and the sound of the mill is low; when one rises at the call of a bird, and all the daughters of song are quiet; when one is afraid of heights, and perils in the street; when the almond tree blooms, and the locust grows sluggish and the caper berry is without effect, because mortals go to their lasting home, and mourners go about the streets; before the silver cord is snapped and the golden bowl is broken . . . And the dust returns to the earth as it once was, and the life breath returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, . . . all things are vanity.

Or listen to the Book of Job:

Is not life on earth a drudgery, its days like those of a wage slave? Like a slave who longs for the shade, a hireling who waits for wages . . . so I have been assigned months of futility, and troubled nights . . . When I lie down I say, "When shall I arise?" [What time is it?] then the night drags on; I am filled with restlessness until the dawn . . . My days . . . come to an end without hope . . . my life is like the wind; . . . The eye that now sees me shall no more behold me; . . . I shall be gone. As a cloud dissolves and vanishes, so whoever goes down to Sheol shall not come up. They shall not return home again; their place shall know them no more. My own utterance I will not restrain; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.

And in the New Testament St. Paul speaks similarly:

What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate . . . The willing is ready at hand, but doing the good is not:- For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want . . . So . . . I discover the principle that when I want to do right, evil is at hand. For I take delight in the law of God, in my inner self, but I see in my members another principle at war with the law of my mind, . . . Miserable man that I am! Who will deliver me from this mortal body?

Modern testimonies of anguish

They say that Buffalo is a city with no illusions. The same may be said at times of biblical writers, who are an anticipation of the many existentialist writers of our recent century. For instance, for many a modern philosopher or novelist we are situated in a world but alienated from it. That feeling drives existentialists. They feel thrown, tossed into this world without having had any choice; tossed into the survival modes established by prior generations not as means of happiness but as ultimately ineffective illusions that confuse more than enlighten. As Ecclesiastes would say: All is vanity and a chase after wind, nothing.

We could use the opening image of Gulliver in Jonathan Swift's famous novel *Gulliver's Travels* in the land of the Lilliputians. How does it begin? He is walking along the shore of Lilliput and – well let him describe it: *I lay down on the grass, which was very short and soft, where I slept sounder than ever I remembered to have done in my life, and, as I reckoned, about nine hours; for when I awaked, it was just day-light. I attempted to rise, but was not able to stir: for, as I happened to lie on my back, I found my arms*

and legs were strongly fastened on each side to the ground; and my hair, which was long and thick, tied down in the same manner. I likewise felt several slender ligatures across my body, from my armpits to my thighs. I could only look upwards; the sun began to grow hot, and the light offended my eyes. I heard a confused noise about me . . .

An existentialist might say that describes our existence in this world. We are born into it without our having any choice and we are immediately and gradually tied up by the rules and regulations, the systems that are in place; the thoughts to think, the biases to embrace and behaviors to enact; if we feel a pinch we are told not to cry, told to smile when our picture is taken. In other words there is a whole system of everydayness, normality, a collection of “facts” into which we are guided so that we become a thing among similar things – objectified beings, “matters of fact”. Then there will come moments, as in the case of Ecclesiastes and Job and Paul, when we feel the pressure and question the logic of our existence. As I have already said, we feel like we have been *thrown* into this world the way a parent throws his sons at an early age, one after the other, into a swimming pool to teach them to swim.

Anxiety begins to punctuate our lives, then lengthens its spell so that like Ecclesiastes, Job, and Paul we wonder: “Where am I? Why am I unhappy? Why do I not feel at home anymore? What’s missing? Why do things I value go stale?” Even religion’s positive configuration or explanation of my existence shows cracks, signs of disintegration. No explanation seems convincing. The history of my world, of the world at large, becomes a bore or like the trailing wake of a ship at sea: visible for a distance and then lost on the surface of an empty ocean.

Poets know what I’m talking about. Take Philip Larkin – whose poem “Home is so Sad” almost makes me – in these closing years of my life – feel anguish as I sit around the last home I shall ever inhabit:

Home is so sad. It stays as it was left,
 Shaped to the comfort of the last to go
 As if to win them back. Instead bereft
 Of anyone to please, it withers so,
 Having no heart to put aside the theft

And turn again to what it started as,
 A joyous shoot at how things ought to be,
 Long fallen wide. You can see how it was:
 Look at the pictures and the cutlery.
 The music in the piano stool. That vase.

A Personal Experience of Anxiety

The more I read these fellows, biblical and modern, the more I see moments in my own life (and I hope you have too) when such a chilling experience came to me. I have mentioned before how when I was sent on for higher biblical studies in Rome I was assigned an article by two biblical critics who analyzed the birth narrative of Jesus in Luke's Gospel – way back in 1957. Until that moment my mind was pretty much tied up like old Gulliver though I wasn't conscious of it. I did not think; my education required that I *absorb* standardized teaching, state the correct answers. And so I read the birth narratives and other narratives of the Bible literally – as a matter of fact, not the product of any kind of art - nary a question raised or even occurring to me. Asking questions interrupted the settled, familiar mindset of the world into which I had been thrown.

You will remember when I told you that only a quarter of a way into the article assigned to me, my literal, “factual” sense of the account began to fall apart, like a picture puzzle's pieces falling off the table one after another, as words took on a poetic twist, became echoes of older Hebrew stories supplying deeper meaning to the text before me, supplying colors as from an Old Testament palette. The birth narrative began to emerge as a drama more so than documented “history”. It became a kind of sacred Art. I underwent an extreme experience of anxiety. “If it's Art, it can't be true! And if this isn't true, can anything be true? Can I care whether anything else be true?”

Not only the narrative, as I had been taught to read it literally, began to fragment, but my standardized faith as well. It was as if the pillars of the Church itself were beginning to tumble under the pressure of some new Samson; leaving me with a vision of nothingness, no meaning to anything. I felt exposed to a barren landscape. That's when I began to sweat – a cold sweat, a moment of existential fear.

Genuine anxiety begins when we begin to question the validity of everything that once was a world to us – reality, guidelines, things, leadership, the news of the day . . . voided before our very eyes.

Yet on the other hand . . .

But what seems to be the end of everything, a prison with no exit, can oddly enough reveal a **revolving door into a new beginning**, “no exit” becoming **instead an entrance into realms beyond** – as in my case with that Lucan birth narrative. **Anxiety began to give way to a kind of relief.** This fragmentation of the text before my eyes, of my world, my mind, my past felt more and more like the shedding of a dead weight, a mental paralysis, like Gulliver breaking his bonds, like a stone being rolled away from a former life that was in fact a kind of burial. It was as if the printed black letters that make up the text of the Eucharist’s Canon, that core part of the Mass, began – each - to change into a blossom of the frailest flower – the whole page become a fragrant garden. (I had a dream like that later on.) A signal of transformation, metamorphosis.

For beyond this world of familiar things lay not just a literal emptiness or nothingness but an Openness (with a capital O) that opened up my mind, my eyes, my curiosity in such a way that, upon turning round, my former world of things could become *itself* luminous, no longer gray but colorful; reveal depths I hadn’t fathomed before – so that a tree, a vase, a person became perceptible in a new light as worthy of attention, beautiful, alive, like a bridge painted by Van Gogh or a city café at midnight by Edward Hopper, full of an emptiness that made me curious, that felt like an invitation. My experience of what seemed like the loss of everything gave me a perspective akin to that of the Boundless Source itself of *All things bright and beautiful, / All creatures great and small, / All things wise and wonderful . . .*

Modern existentialists, of course, do not ordinarily call this Boundless Source – this Unpronounceable - God. Why? Because that makes of this Source an object like you and me and this desk and this building, a thing among other things – and God is no thing, no object, no he or she or it among other objects. Otherwise God would not be God – so Open!

But if philosophers are restricted in their vocabulary of how to portray this Source of all things, biblical poets are not; and so in the *Book of Genesis* we have this scene at Bethel where Jacob at a very anxious moment in his life dreams of a stairway with its top reaching into the heavens and God’s angels ascending and descending – **a graphic way of saying graceful moments are coming at us every day and graceful moments are drawing us out of our anxieties every day toward a bigness of Being akin to that of our**

Unpronounceable yet Extremely Committed Origin. And we are home again as any credible mystic will tell you.

The Readings for February 2018

February 4th 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Reading: Job 7:1-4, 6-7

This happens to be the very passage I quoted earlier where Job complains: *Is not life on earth a drudgery, its days like those of a wage slave? If you want more, elsewhere he moans: Perish the day on which I was born, the night when they said, "The child is a boy!" May that day be darkness . . . May light not shine upon it! . . . because it did not keep shut the doors of the womb to shield my eyes from trouble! Why did I not die at birth . . .?*

I assume you know something about Job – a fictitious character but a model of so many human beings down through time. He is the victim of extreme suffering. He was once rich, had a large family, land; prosperous in every way – and a faithful believer in God; abiding by God’s laws perfectly, a firm believer in the system. And then he lost it all, lost his bearings. Not only that, but he became covered with boils and lived upon an ash heap. And he wonders why because he has been a good man. His friends assume, based on the prevailing dogma that suffering is a punishment from God, that he did something wrong.

But morality has nothing to do with Job’s plight. He is an extreme example of someone **whose world has fallen apart or who as we say has hit bottom, and who is anxious to know why, extremely distraught with this enigma we call life.** He tries to argue his way back into his old equilibrium in whatever rational way he can – but achieves no peace.

What he doesn’t realize is that, sitting there upon that ash heap, **he is in the ripest position to discover the true nature of God** – as someone so awesome, so far beyond his grasp, so transcendent beyond our juridical ideas of justice, so big of Being, of Heart enthroned within a universe that’s also beyond Job’s ken that Job himself **is overwhelmed not by emptiness but by the wonder, the grace of it all,** the freedom to see things beyond the befogged vision of his prior self and system – silenced but only to learn how to breathe again and speak again in terms not of complaint but of a new found wisdom, a new found God loving enough to dialogue with him in all

his littleness – to speak in a radically new language – call it metaphor – musically, cosmically.

He has reached that **turning point, that revolving door** I mentioned in the Introduction which allows him access to a change of view, a *metanoia* that allows him in the final chapter to recover all that he has lost, a fresher world than before – family, a sense of worth, a world no longer grim but colorful, including his revived daughters whose names are now Dove and Perfume and Eye Shadow, the latter to accentuate the fact that like her father she became bright eyed and far seeing. The Book of Job ends with a sense of hope far greater than the one he had when everything seemed to be working well for him.

Gospel Reading: Mark 1: 29-39

In what way may this year's assigned Gospel of Mark address this theme of profound human anxiety? Well, we spoke of Jacob's vision of angels descending moment by moment into our lives with insights, revelations that can turn despair into a revolving door that steers us into a new, wide open direction, that sets us free, awakens trust, hope, even love again. **And what is Christ in the Gospel of Mark but a unique angel arriving *determined* to set us free. Doesn't he apply Jacob's vision to himself in John's Gospel? And I say *determined* to set us free because a theme of combat with what ails us runs through Mark's Gospel.**

After having resisted the snares of wealth, fame and power (more amply narrated in the temptation narratives of Matthew and Luke), there follows in Mark the episode in which Jesus raises Simon's mother-in-law who lies vexed with fever. The translations say he touched her. The Greek word *kratesas* says more than "touched"; it's loaded with a kind of violence, translatable in English as arrest, grasp forcibly, hold tightly, hold fast, retain. So you might see him grabbing her and pulling her out of her sick bed. Jesus has no time for moodiness, self-pity. He's all for a resurrection from one's bed, from the dead, toward a life of service to others.

Then there is that incident that leads into today's actual reading, where Jesus strides into a synagogue in Capharnaum and sparks interest because he speaks with authority and not like a moralizing scribe. And right away the possessed man whom we might diagnose as depressed, hopeless, angry to the point where he is ready to ridicule any Pollyanna that comes along, feels the force of Jesus' presence. Indeed anticipating that Jesus will try to

exorcise him, he shouts out a counter-exorcism directed like a blow at Jesus, exposing Jesus as “the Holy One of God” not out of reverence but as too awesome to be approachable – which will scare people off.

And the text says that Jesus muzzles (*phimotheti*) the man, in effect tells him to shut up and shouts at him, “Come out!” – a demand so painful for the fellow that he screams, goes into convulsions. How painful and into what convulsions must our society go through before it can shed the greed, deception, fear, the hatred, the racism, the hopelessness that never seems to lose its grip upon us?

In these possessed people of the Gospel we meet that kind of belligerence that seems to possess modern cynics and skeptics, often comedians who enjoy exposing the credulity of ordinary people, joke about faith, hope, even love.

So much of our media seem compelled to make the worst of human nature our daily fare – enough to ruin one’s every day. And so Mark presents **Jesus as counter-belligerent**, ready to exorcise such tendencies that favor “not-to-be” over “to-be”. Jesus arrives as a commanding figure, **not as gentle** as pious souls might wish. And from there we read of the overflow. By the day’s end: *The whole town was gathered at the door. He cured many who were sick . . . and he drove out many demons, not permitting them to speak because they knew him.* A D Day landing has arrived, grace has invaded our world – powerfully, and so may its power reach even you!

February 11th 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Reading: Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46

Here I want to dwell not so much on the leprosy but upon the segregation that this Old Testament legislation imposes. The priestly Book of Leviticus requires that lepers live apart and signal their approach among healthy people. [Many a moody person even nowadays sends out signals “to stay away from me”, whether they know it or not.]

Of course, this was only one type that society segregated out of fear or disgust. Segregation has been a human device for ages – in our own society exercised toward people of a darker skin, Asians, Native Americans; in other times against Jews, Gypsies, yes, even the Irish, anyone with an accent. Which brings us to the Gospel reading for today.

Gospel Reading: Mark 1: 40-45

In keeping with the combat theme we spoke of in the cure of the possessed fellow earlier, Jesus reacts angrily toward this case of leprosy as well. As one exegete says, the description of Jesus as “*Moved with pity should almost certainly read . . . moved with anger,*” as in alternative manuscripts of this account. Also regarding Jesus’ warning the leper *sternly and dismissing* him, the alternative accounts describe Jesus reacting with “*hot indignation against the leprous spirit.*” In this state of extreme emotion he “*drives out the spirit*” before sending the man off to have his cure certified. Metaphorically we may say that God gets emotional, even severe whenever we allow worry to dictate our relationships.

Jesus came to attack not so much you and me personally but the anxiety, the worry itself that makes us sick. As for *you yourself* he comes with ardent care. Do you evaluate yourself as an untouchable? The first thing Jesus does is touch the untouchable leper even as Jesus is touched by your moods and would turn them into that revolving door I spoke of, that roundabout that will get you moving in directions more hopeful, creative, curious, sociable, fully human again – because no less than God loves you; so why be depressed –absolutely - about anything?

Commencement of the Lenten Cycle

February 18th 1st Sunday of Lent

First Reading: Genesis: 9: 8-15

The Liturgy begins this Lenten season with a reference to the Noah’s Flood story. Why? It may well be because Lent, phasing into Easter, leads to the **waters of baptism, the immersion of new Christians and the renewal of that sacrament for the faithful in general. So water at this time plays a big symbolic role.** Deluged as we are by so much that’s negative, suffocating, often depressing, the Church would bring us up for air, even as Noah’s Ark settles upon a mountain tope, even as Christ rises from his own tomb.

The biblical flood story borrows from a more ancient Mesopotamian story, the *Gilgamesh Epic*, named for its main character, an ancient king who reigned over the region of the two great rivers, Tigris and Euphrates. It dates from around 1200 BC but originated much earlier. It’s a story about grief over this thing called death, the loss of a friend. Gilgamesh was an unruly monarch and so the gods confronted him with a wild man named Enkidu. After jointly slaying your usual “dragon” they become fast friends

– until the gods, who seem very arbitrary (like the Nature they represent), decree Enkidu's death. Gilgamesh is inconsolable and seeks out an immortal old man who was the sole survivor of a universal flood. The Bible's own flood story is close to a carbon copy of this earlier Gilgamesh account.

The old man tells Gilgamesh of a secret plant in a river that can bestow immortality. Gilgamesh finds the plant or as the ancient text tells it:

*He tied stones to his feet and descended
 Into the river. When he saw the plant
 Of rich rose color and ambrosial
 Shimmering in the water like a prism
 Of the sunlight, he seized it, and it cut
 Into his palms. He saw his blood flow in the water.
 He cut the stones loose from his feet and rose
 Up sharply to the surface and swam to the shore,
 Calling out, I have it! I have it!*
 (Even back then a premonition of baptism?)

But on his way home, while he is bathing in a stream, a serpent comes out of the water and devours the plant, shedding its skin [as snakes do] - leaving Gilgamesh with only the snake's empty skin and the Epic's final verse: *He sat down on the ground and wept.* In other words, says the Epic: fatalism is our only choice; don't expect any happy endings.

Our own Noah story shares the distress of this ancient Epic, this experience of life as a deluge of pain and ultimately death that spoil all the wonders this world has to offer. The polytheists of the Middle East attributed this to forces, even divinities, beyond their ken and control – forces that played lethal games with us – like pandemics, tyranny, famine, fire, actual floods that turned civilizations built of clay into mud. [Are we doing the same thing?] *The Hebrew writer however* traces the responsibility for so much pain to human beings themselves, (people like Cain, Lamech, greedy aristocracies) who, given our potential today for nuclear war, make a flood seem mild by comparison – and leaves us even more anxious than all prior generations.

But at least our Hebrew version of the Deluge alerts us *to our role in such disasters.* It doesn't let us off the hook. And **also introduces us to a truer**

understanding God as **ultimately** not vindictive and arbitrary but as concerned enough to create the rainbow to signal that existence can indeed result in a happier ending - that in a Gospel sense we will ultimately arise – with Christ – out of our immersion in the deep blue sea – out of the blues of which Ethel Waters sang: *I hate to see that evening sun go down . . .* And so we move on to the Gospel reading.

Gospel Reading: Mark 1: 12-15

And who emerges from a desert populated it seems by demons and false promises, the same desert that shook the hopes of the Hebrew people during the Exodus and shakes your own hopes at times? A new Moses who can make the waters of death and depression part, even make graves open – Jesus, announcing “The time of fulfillment has begun right now, this very year, God’s real world is about to dawn.”

February 25th 2nd Sunday of Lent

First Reading: Genesis 22: 1-18

This Genesis account of God’s test of Abraham’s faith is difficult to deal with. Juliana Claassens, a notable South African biblical scholar, writes: *A disconcerting feature of this text is that Abraham does not blink at the outrageous request of God that he slay his son.* She also states that *From this narrative an image of God emerges as capricious; one minute slay the child, next minute spare the child; one minute cold hearted, next minute compassionate.* It’s such ambiguity about the God of the Old Testament that turns people off or has them go through mental gymnastics to make him look quite justified in what he does.

But underlying the story as we have it I sense there is a deeper, even prior version of the story that shows an evolution of Israel’s understanding of God. In the Hebrew text God is given two names. In the early half he is described as *Elohim* (a broader word for God, not uncommon throughout the ancient Near East). This is the God who commands child sacrifice, the sacrifice of Isaac – another thing not uncommon in that region as a way of acknowledging one’s dependence on God for the miracle of fertility.

In the later half of the text the name *Jahweh* (the Lord, He who IS) usurps the name *Elohim*, *Jahweh* being the name revealed to Moses at Mount Horeb before the Exodus. This *Jahweh* is the God who seems to contradict *Elohim*, telling Abraham not to lay a hand on the boy; to sacrifice a farm animal instead.

Could it be that between the lines this text reflects how Israel, under the profound influence of Moses, monotheism and the exodus from Egypt, **advanced theologically beyond the capricious fertility gods and human sacrifices of their neighbors toward a *transcendent* Creator far beyond mere nature – to a place where Israel itself could transcend its subservience to nature, its fear of nature, to be truly human, the custodian of nature?**

So what do we have here but evidence of Israel's arrival at no longer the distress of an Ecclesiastes or Job confronting life as tragic, a dead end, but **at that revolving door we spoke of that propels one into a realm of reality wide open, beckoning one to transcend hopelessness, to live in unfolding ways forever**; to access discoveries as countless as the sands of the seashore and the stars in the sky, to welcome every day as a new beginning? Which today's Gospel reading illustrates . . .

Gospel Reading: Mark 9: 2-10

Certainly by chapter 2 of Mark's Gospel **the disciples of Jesus have begun to pass through that revolving door, to leave behind the drudgery of casting nets into the sea and coming up with nothing.** They have followed Jesus up a steep grade and now see him changed, transfigured, his clothes dazzling white, Moses and Elijah, the doorkeepers of the Old Testament, conversing with him. Right away they want to build altars, freeze the moment until a voice says in effect, "Stop thinking monuments, stop calcifying revelations. Just listen for once in your lives."

The moment doesn't last. The glimpse of new possibilities fades; their vision returns to 20/20. But once having briefly passed through that revolving door of the Transfiguration we know **they will never absolutely succumb to despair again, not even if Christ is crucified.**

Eucharist: Passing through that revolving door that leads from the Liturgy of the Word into the Eucharist itself, we come forward at Communion time to be touched by the power, the intensity of Being that Christ, in bread and wine, can communicate; that can relieve our stress, raise us from the dead. And if you doubt that a piece of bread and sip of wine are too small to achieve anything so wonderful, remember William Blake's challenge: *To see a World in a Grain of Sand / And Heaven in a Wild Flower / Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand / And Eternity in an hour.*