

## **World Communion Sunday**

**Job 1:1; 2: 1-10**

**Psalms 26**

**Mark 10: 13-16**

### **Hearts of Flint**

There was once a community in the land of the USA called Flint, Michigan.

Perhaps you've heard of it.

It is the locale of "North America's biggest public health tragedy".

(Henry, Tom. *SEJ BookShelf*. "What the Eyes Don't See: A Story of Crisis,

Resistance and Hope in an American City", June 27, 2018)

This community was as blameless and upright as most, fearing God and shunning evil,  
to the best of its ability.

It was composed of close to 100,000 people; 57% who were black,

37% who were white, and 6% who identified as other.

Between 2009 and 2013, some 41.5% of Flint's residents lived below the poverty line,  
compared to just 16.8% of the rest of Michigan.

When The Adversary and his heavenly court came knocking at the Lord's door,

The Adversary suggested allowing him to test Flint's true grit,

by switching their water system off the beautiful

and plentiful waters of Lake Huron, to the cheaper and more easily accessible,

but notably polluted, waters of the Flint River.

What harm could a little lead do, The Adversary thought, as long as money  
is being saved?

Besides, it only affects the youngest children, really, who are a dime a dozen in Flint. Furthermore, water is invisible. No eye will ever see the evil inherent in its make-up.

“Does Flint fear You” for nothing”, The Adversary asked of God.

“Have you put a fence around it and its households and everything within?

Listen, if you allow me to do my bidding and use my contacts in the government

to switch water systems, I bet Flint will turn on you in a heartbeat,

and curse you to your face.”

“Very well,” the Lord said to The Adversary. “Everything they have is in your hands.

But on *my servant* Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, you must not lay a finger.”

She’s the daughter of Iraqi Muslim immigrants who fled

the atrocities of Saddam Hussein’s murderous regime;

she has a heart of love for that city and its people.

She will hear their cries and see what the eyes of others don’t see. Let her be.

And thus the story of the Flint water crisis unfolds, beginning in September of 2015.

As I was reading the prologue to the book of Job,

which portends the unjustified suffering of a family and all of their possessions,

I happened to hear the Flint pediatrician, Dr. Mona, being interviewed

on one of the CBS talk shows about her new book,

*What The Eyes Don’t See*, and I was riveted by her testimony.

It was like picking up the Magic Eight Ball that we used to play with as children,

turning it over in my hand, and seeing the word “Flint” pop up

in the underside screen.

Was God giving me this story as a modern parallel to the Job saga,

I wondered? And if so, what was God trying to show me  
in juxtaposing these two?

It was appalling, what Dr. Mona began to witness in child after child after child  
brought into her office suffering from cognitive impairment and  
elevated blood-lead levels.

Knowing very little about water treatment issues, Dr. Mona shared her dilemma  
with a high school friend, Elin Betanzo, who was working at the Environmental  
Protection Agency at the time.

Together they began to process data from the county on lead-exposure tests  
required of all children under age five, which revealed an obvious spike  
in lead elevation since the water system switch, due to  
neurotoxins from the Flint River leaching into children's bloodstreams  
via the brown, foul-smelling water dripping from their faucets at home.

Dr. Mona was *one person*, basically, swimming upstream  
against a culture of government sanctioned fiscal irresponsibility,  
public unhealth, legal disregard, environmental injustice,  
and a blatant disrespect and hardness of heart for  
the impoverished people of Flint, most of whom are people of color,  
and for their most vulnerable children.

She endured many a sleepless night before making her revelations known to the public.  
And she courageously survived intense backlash from the Governor's office,  
from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality,  
as well as from others motivated politically to downplay Flint's problems.

Yet she was fiercely passionate, feisty, plucky, articulate, perseverant,  
and, most of all, empathetic to the suffering and plight of her people.  
And it struck me as I heard the citizens of Flint talking on that show,  
even today three years after the revelation of the massive disaster,  
that their saga was Jobian; that they as a community  
had been subjected unmercifully, like Job's family, to a catastrophic  
event affecting family, home, health, well-being and even life;  
that the very basic survival acts of eating, drinking, bathing and washing  
were undermining their immediate and future capability to  
live and move and have their being in God.

And yet, even in their dire dilemma, Flint had *one person, one advocate*,  
with a heart of flesh, who realized and empathized with their unseen suffering,  
and who was willing, herself, to suffer with them and for them;  
*one person* who was not afraid to protest and lash out and speak truth to power,  
nor to endure the intense backlash from "well-meaning"  
governmental spokespeople intent upon downplaying Flint's problems;  
*one person* who thus ushered in hope for them in the face of great tragedy.

If you ever doubt in the *power of one*, of one spokesperson,  
of one advocate, of one vote, of one ordinary person, read Dr. Mona's story!  
(*NPR Books. "What The Eyes Don't See: A Story of Crisis, Resistance, and Hope  
In An American City"*, June 25, 2018)

(Livengood, Chad. *Crain's Detroit Business. "Dr. Mona's new book tells how  
tide turned on state in Flint water crisis"*, June 15, 2018)

To me, Flint's story has three touch points in common with the book of Job:

first, it is a story of unimaginable tragedy and loss;  
secondly, it is a story of the feisty, faithful resistance *by one*  
incredible, argumentative character with a heart of flesh,  
who is unafraid to wade into the murky waters of political corruption  
and confront the suffering of her impoverished people;  
and thirdly, it is a story of a resulting tempered hope for restoration,  
still yet to be fully realized, but hope, nevertheless.

For as the Apostle Paul says in the book of Romans, "suffering produces  
endurance, endurance produces character, and character  
produces hope." (Romans 5:3-4)

The book of Job, of course, is a parable of ancient wisdom literature  
in the Hebrew Scripture.

It challenges our theological thinking, where the blessings of family, home, health  
and wealth supposedly are God's rewards  
for a life of righteousness and good character.

The parable features a single earthly protagonist, Job, who is living this good life  
surrounded by his wife, his children and all that they have earned and deserve,  
and by well-meaning friends, who are constantly  
scratching their heads trying to figure out what's really going on with him.

Then, on the heavenly side, it features God, surrounded by God's heavenly council,  
which happens to include The Satan, or The Adversary, or The Accuser,  
whose job it is to sniff out those who might be disloyal to God  
or who might be acting in opposition to God.

The Adversary is not opposed to the reign of God, as we might think,  
but rather he is on God's side, faithfully sniffing out any opposition to God's rule.

I've heard Job's story a million times, as I know you have, typically stereotyping  
any number of calamities and natural disasters as Jobian.

But when I read the text today for this World Communion Sunday,

I am struck not so much by the devastating **loss** that looms large in the story,  
and that reflects myriad similar tragedies and losses world-wide,

floods, hurricanes, famines, tsunamis, epidemics, wars, even genocides,  
but rather I am struck this time by the quite remarkable

gift of God for the people of God who dominates the plot:

Job, the singular servant whom God fondly identifies as *my servant*.

And in this way, I am inclined to read the book of Job as an extended servant song,

much like that of Moses, or Jonah, or Jeremiah, or even Isaiah's servant songs;  
as a ballad extolling the extraordinary gift of God's singular servant,

and of that one servant's obedient modeling of suffering faithfulness  
on behalf of his or her people.

*My servant* has a heart for discerning what is right and what is not right in the world,  
and for taking a stand against injustice and unrightness.

*My servant* has a heart of flesh, suffering greatly with and for the people  
when calamity overwhelms those around him or her.

*My servant* is articulate, spunky and fearless, not hesitant to protest  
and speak truth to power, even when that ultimate power is God.

Nor is *my servant* afraid to remain in relationship and in constant contact with a God whose sovereignty one finds terribly difficult to fathom.

*My servant* is a harbinger of hope, not because he can fix or undo the ravages of the disaster around him, but because he cares so deeply for the well-being of the world, and is not afraid to stand in the gap and serve as a liaison between a suffering world and a sovereign God.

*My servant* exemplifies the power of one, even in the face of great disaster.

*My servant, Job*, prefigures my suffering servant Jesus, whom God also lifts up in the fullness of time, to vicariously suffer for the redemption of his people, swallowing death forever, and wiping away every tear from their eyes.

*My servant, Job*, is a gift of God for the people of God in the midst of crisis, as is my servant, Dr. Mona, as are many other faithful servants whom we can name one by one by one.

They represent *the God-empowerment of one* against Goliath-like odds.

Perhaps what the eyes don't see, is that God gifts us with these courageous individuals, *my servants*, in these tragedies, who have hearts for hurting humanity and for the hurting environment, and who are not afraid to suffer themselves in taking a stand and speaking out against the government or even against God to advocate for the promise of shalom, well-being, health, and the wholeness of creation.

Thanks be to God for the gift of one and for the power of each *my servant, my suffering faithful servant*, who is not afraid or reluctant

to wade into troubled water to speak for and to redeem his or her precious people.

Amen.

Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

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