

“Job’s Lament” / Job 23: 1-9, 16-17 / 14 October 2012

Old Job, patron saint of the brokenhearted and the unfairly-treated; he’s a symbol for all the fine people who end up suffering the depths of human misery despite their good behavior, the folks who look to the skies and cry out, “Why?” Job’s not happy. Nowadays his doctor would give him a pill to improve his mood. His doctor would tell him that it’s okay to mourn his losses for exactly two months. Anything more than that is wallowing. After those two months, no more moping; he has to get on with his life. But...Job can’t get on with his life. He’s desolate, broken, emotionally wasted. All he can do is grieve, and question, and complain. The worst thing Job could do is to pretend that everything is okay; for if he does that, then he’s sweeping all that pain under the rug, and nothing that’s swept under a rug will ever stay there. The only way out...is through.

I was never a fan of Clint Eastwood, and I’m still not. He always seems to play the exact same character in every movie. Back in his heyday, I preferred actors of the cartoon variety: Daffy Duck, Foghorn Leghorn, Tom and Jerry. Those were my favorite actors. But I’ve got to admit, Clint Eastwood has come a long way since “Two Mules for Sister Sara.” Consider his recent film “Gran Torino.” I didn’t want to see “Gran Torino” because I know Gran Torinos as muscle cars from the 70s. When I heard that Eastwood had a movie named after a 70s muscle car, I just assumed that it was the same old shoot-‘em-up-high-speed-chase-cool-silent-guy-who-gets-the-girl-routine. But this movie got good reviews, and Michelle wanted to see it, so we watched “Gran Torino.” It’s not about muscle cars at all. It’s about old, old hurts and how they can fester in a person’s soul. It’s a movie about a lonely old man who learns—just before dying—what it means to sort through his own sense of guilt and loss.

The opening scene is the troubled city of modern Detroit; old Walt Kowalski is a retired Ford factory worker, and he’s sitting at his wife’s funeral, bristling at the shallow words of a starry-eyed young priest. The priest is a baby-faced lad with blonde hair who talks cheerfully about how death isn’t sad; it’s all okay because we go to heaven in the end. Walt—like all of Eastwood’s characters—is a man of few words and many scowls. When the priest tries to console him, Walt says to the priest, in that Clint Eastwood style, “I think you’re an overeducated 27 year old virgin who likes to hold hands with old ladies and promise them everlasting life.” After the funeral, he goes home to an empty house in a shabby Detroit neighborhood, on a street that’s mostly inhabited by a recent wave of immigrants from Vietnam. The streets are rife with gang violence and rap music.

The world is a-changing, and old Walt just can’t keep up: his wife is gone; the auto industry that he loved and threw his life into is ailing; the city where he raised his children has become a foreign land. Walt’s alone with his memories and his ill-humor, living in the past, but keeping all those painful memories as far from the surface as possible. He’s just a crotchety old man who wants nothing more than to keep to himself; he just wants the neighbor kids to stay off his lawn. He’s a proud veteran of the Korean Conflict, and though you don’t find out until late in the film, he’s still got deep, painful secrets, these forty years later. Walt’s kids are distant and unaffectionate, probably because that’s the kind of father Walt was: unaffectionate. He’s only reaping the poor relationships that he sowed, but a man in Walt’s world can’t afford to show his feelings. Feelings are for women.

Now, if you’re offended by strong language and racial slurs, then don’t see this movie. Walt’s a sad guy, but he’s also a rude, bigoted, foul-mouthed, angry old man

who's kept his pain all bottled up for so long that he's just brimming with hatred. He hates Jews, and Mexicans, and blacks. Walt makes insulting comments about the Italian barber and the Irish mechanic, and you should hear what he says about people who drive Kias. But most of all he dislikes East Asians: the Koreans, the Japanese, the Chinese, and the Vietnamese...like his neighbors. You feel guilty for disliking Walt. And yet, he's just reaping the world he sowed: a lonely world, a world of silence, secrecy, unexpressed grief. The one thing he loves, the one thing of beauty in all his life is his 1972 Ford Gran Torino...which Walt's Vietnamese neighbor boy tries to steal.

Well, I don't want to spoil the movie for you, but to make a long story short, old Walt ends up befriending the boy who tried to steal his car. He chases off the gangsters who try to kidnap the boy, and then Walt tries to get him a job and make a man of him, teaching him how to use profanity like a man, how to make racist jokes like a man, how to spit and cuss. In return, the Vietnamese community makes old Walt an honorary member of their group, bringing him strange dishes that he won't even feed to his dog. And in the end, Walt lays down his own life to free his new friend from the violence of the local street gangs. And you learn before he dies that the neighbor boy reminds Walt of someone he killed long ago, during the Korean War, a teenage boy who was scared and only trying to surrender. He'd been carrying the guilt around for decades and decades, and in some strange Hollywood way, his gruff kindness to the neighbor boy is just an attempt to set things right in the world. And all of Walt's sorrow, and anger, and bigotry, and loneliness are due to his inability to face one very deep, very old hurt. And Walt's dramatic death is the only way he can finally find to atone.

I believe that we live in an age that has forgotten how to grieve its sorrows. I believe that society all around us is embarrassed by suffering, and even though they really do want to help when the going gets tough, they also want people to "buck up," and "be strong," and recover perhaps prematurely from their grief. I think most of us nurse a deep, secret belief that dealing with our grief is a self-indulgence that only the weak entertain. But after all our vain attempts to not deal with our grief, the grief remains. And the only way out...is through. We could learn a lesson from old Job, whose adult children have all perished when a roof collapsed, whose crops failed, whose friends proved to be fools. In his profoundest sorrow, Job cries out angrily:

"I'm not letting up—I'm standing my ground. My complaint is legitimate. God has no right to treat me like this—it isn't fair! If I knew where on earth to find the Holy One, I'd go straight there. But I can't find God. I've looked everywhere. There's no one within reach, no complaint department, no customer service hotline. Nothing!" And then Job utters those sincerest of words. "God makes my heart sink. God Almighty gives me the shudders." Oh, you've been there. So have I. We've all felt the painful absence—or seeming absence—of God in the midst of our troubles. If you could tell us your story, if you could let down all your guards and truly allow us to see you in your full humanity, it wouldn't take long until you unwrapped the hidden thing that vexes you, the loss, the failure, the regret, the shame. But chances are, you never tell the whole story. You don't think anyone wants to hear it, and there are things a person just doesn't say.

What if there really were a place where you could tell it all, without hiding anything, assured that no one will judge you? What if there were a person who would listen without condemnation, a person who listened without glancing at his or her cell phone to check the time while you were speaking? What if you actually did have the

opportunity to speak your whole story to someone who cared and wouldn't judge you for it? Would you do it? Many of us probably do have people like that in our lives, and we still don't tell them about the things that make us sad. How can we tell others about the things that we can't fully admit to ourselves? How can we look for acceptance in them when we've never really discovered it in the mirror? That's why I like old Job's lament. There's not steely resolve about it. He wails. He weeps. He shakes his fist at the heavens. Job doesn't hide from his great unhappiness, the way society tells us to do. He owns his grief. He walks with it. He forms it into words and has a conversation with it. How much healthier Job's way of life is than Walt Kowalski's! Here you've got the stories of two grief-stricken men: one pushes it down so long and so hard that it ends up exploding his whole life; the other does the hard work of naming the grief, owning it, and eventually recovering from it.

*The Light Princess* is a fairy tale about a princess who was born without any weight at all. She was physically light, but her moods and her attitudes were also light. She was breezy, and easygoing, and unattached. But because she was forever light, she was unable to love, unable to sympathize or feel compassion. She laughed at the pain of others, completely mystified by suffering, until one day, she experienced an enormous fright, the near-death of someone who loved her. She tried to rescue him as he was tormented and nearly drowned. And finally, seeing what she was about to lose, she wept. And with her tears, weight came to her, and wisdom, and compassion. I'm not saying that God necessarily sends us pain in order to make us grow. (The jury is still out on that one.) But I am saying that there is a degree of depth and weight that we can only experience if we've known pain. And if we've faced it, and acknowledged it, and made room at our table for it. There are depths of joy that only those who've suffered know. And if we will walk with our hurts and not run from them, they have the sacred possibility to make us fuller human beings: wiser, gentler, more joyful, more keenly aware of pleasure, and wonder, and awe, and love.

Nothing swept under a rug will ever go away. Wholeness can only come after the grief has been embraced, just as resurrection can only come after the cross has been embraced. And in the end—believe it or not—God does the strangest, most unexpected thing. God picks up all the broken pieces, all the tiny little shards, tenderly blessing them, and God makes of them new life. This is the lesson of Job. Amen.