

COVID-19, All Souls Day and experiencing the grief of Job

“Why is light given to the toilers, / life to the bitter in spirit? / They wait for death and it does not come; / they search for it more than for hidden treasures.” – Job 3:20-21

What good is hope, [Job](#) asks, for those who have been struck by death? What comfort is available to the suffering?

At the beginning of the Book of Job, he mourns the unthinkable devastation that has deprived him of his livelihood – even of his children – and has afflicted him with sores all over his body. Thus begins Job’s story, which poses humanity’s most fundamental religious question: How does a believer reconcile a God who is good with the experience of suffering?

Scholars believe that the Book of Job may be one of the most ancient books of the Hebrew Scriptures. But the question it poses is one we still grapple with today: How can we believe in God’s goodness when we seem to suffer disaster at random?

The answers of the Book of Job are not easy. It’s a book that wrestles honestly with the hard truths of tragedy. The book poses many questions that are unanswerable for human beings. How can our God be all-powerful, asks Job, when death seems to triumph?

Our Job-like state

One month ago, COVID-19 claimed its 700,000th life in the United States. Teresa Sullivan, a Catholic hospital chaplain in St. Louis, has been ministering to family members of those who have COVID-19 and COVID-19 patients for the past year. She says that the pandemic has left us all in a raw state.

A hospital, she says, is always vulnerable, but people are

even more vulnerable now – [more aware of their mortality](#). She finds that people are anxious to have someone to share with what's going on in their heart ;they are eager to talk. They often look to chaplains to help find meaning.

But Sullivan believes that words are never as important as presence. “It's the [ability to stay](#) when there are lots of people who can't do that,” she said.

She was recently orienting a team of deacons to the hospital. One was concerned that he would say the wrong thing to a patient. Sullivan remembers feeling that when she first started, but she recited a mantra of her chaplain training: “Long before I enter the room, [God is there](#). While I'm present, God is there. Long after I leave the room, God will still be there.”

The chaplain's presence doesn't bring God in, Sullivan says, but simply reminds us of God's presence already among us.

Sullivan said that if you have not walked through an ICU or have seen the hospital devastation during these waves of COVID-19, it's hard to imagine the exhaustion and pain of hospital staff and frontline workers. In the same way, she thinks that so much of the pain of the pandemic has been hidden.

And, to Sullivan, it's this image of 700,000 deaths hidden in plain sight that captures the way grief often works in the United States. “The amount of people who are carrying heavy grief on their hearts is huge,” she said. “There are so many people who are grieving out there – grief is very hidden. We are a very death-fearing society.

But grief is not something we can or should endure alone, she said.

All Souls Day

On Nov. 2, the universal Church celebrates the Commemoration of all the Faithful Departed (All Souls Day). In the United States, the most recognizable celebration of [All Souls Day](#) is the Latino celebrations of *Día de los Muertos*. It incorporates symbolism and traditions from deeply Indigenous customs and the Christian celebration of the feast of All Souls.

Families construct *ofrendas* to honor the dead's memory – small altars decorated with yellow and orange *zempasúchitl* flowers, paper cutouts, candles, photographs, bread, water and their favorite foods and mementos. In Chicano communities in the United States, there are parades, music and dancing. It's a day of prayer and memory.

[Día de los Muertos](#) isn't a day of public mourning – it's a communal celebration. And its emphasis on community and memory instructs the universal Church on the meaning of All Souls Day.

In the late 10th century, Odilo, the abbot of the powerful and influential Benedictine abbey in Cluny, France, declared Nov. 2 the feast of All Souls – a day to pray for all the dead in need of Christ's mercy. By the time the first Spanish soldiers reached Mexico in 1519, All Souls Day was a fixture of the liturgical calendar.

The feast originally was a somber one of prayer and penance for the souls in purgatory. It usually featured a solemn requiem Mass. But Pope St. Paul VI felt that the feast's penitential emphasis on the judgment of God was too stark a contrast with the celebration of All Saints the day before – a day that proclaimed the victory of Christ over the grave and all the forgotten blessed who are saved through Christ's mercy.

In his liturgical reform in the 1960s, Paul VI changed the

liturgy of All Souls to emphasize Christ's resurrection overcoming the sting of death. The liturgy emphasizes the Paschal Mystery of Christ's gift of love offers hope to all those who have died, even those not yet enjoying the beatitude of heaven.

"May the death and resurrection of Christ, which we celebrate in this Eucharist bring the departed faithful to the peace of your eternal home," reads a prayer at Mass.

The *ofrendas* on *Día de los Muertos* are meant to guide the spirits of loved ones home – to give them rest. On All Souls, Catholics pray for restless souls, souls still undergoing purgation or trial, souls still not finally at rest in the peace of our eternal home of God's love.

On All Souls, we draw together to remember our loved ones through the lens of the death and Resurrection of Christ – God's gift of self for us, to save us.

The celebrations of *Día de los Muertos* demonstrate that a loved one, even when lost, can be a source of celebration when remembered in a community gathered to honor and intercede for them.

Día de los Muertos signifies the truth that Paul VI wanted the liturgy of All Souls to proclaim: The love that unites the members of Christ's mystical body cannot be shaken by death.



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In God, love lasts

This truth – that Christ has triumphed over sin, that there is love on the other side of death – is not an easy truth.

Job doesn't get easy truths either. At the end of the Book of Job, God finally speaks. But he doesn't give Job an answer for his suffering. Rather, God says: "Gird up your loins now, like a man; / I will question you, and you tell me the answers! / Where were you when I founded the earth? / Tell me, if you have understanding. / Who determined its size? Surely you know?" (38:3-5).

Job, of course, cannot answer, because he does not know.

The ending of the Book of Job gives no answer to suffering, except that God is God and we are human. God is the creator; we are creatures. In a world out of our control, we have no option but to rely upon his mercy.

We, like Job, may feel raw – vulnerable, out of control – to be suffering at the hands of a universe God does not always seem so present in. We may feel that we have no one to walk with us in this feeling of abandonment. We may feel that our grief is hidden – that God does not see it, and neither can our neighbor.

But, as Catholics, we are people of memory. Our liturgy has at its heart anamnesis, which means a remembering – a making present. We hold on to the memories of what has passed, even what is sorrowful, because it is in our remembering together that we find we are not alone, and neither are those who have gone before us. They are with God – God who loved them long before us, God who loves them still, and the God in whom we can love without death ever marking our love's ending.

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