

What do you Want?

Rob Gieselmann, Epiphany 2A, 1/19/2014

When you find a genie in a bottle, you get three wishes. And I want to know – what would *you* wish for? ... Besides world peace, and a cure for cancer.

The other day, I looked online -and found a site posting peoples' wishes. One single guy wished for a cure for epilepsy, plus, he wished for a family, and a better job. A woman posted, *to live with my fiancé in a house we own, and to be immortal*. A third person wished for the correct Powerball lottery numbers, and, she said, *“let someone else have the other two wishes – I don't mind sharing them.”*

When I was growing-up, the neighborhood kids would mill about, kick cans and throw rocks at signs. It was unstructured time – sadly, an arcane concept. Anyway, we'd eventually get to the genie in a bottle game – and at least one smark-alek would answer, I'd wish for 1000 more wishes. In other words, he'd *game the system*.

Now, Jesus is no genie -well, he does turn water into wine – but he doesn't really grant wishes – but on that one day, he turned to these two of John's disciples who happened to be trailing him, and asked them, *What do you want? What do you want?* These goofballs missed the opportunity of a lifetime– They should have asked for *1000 more wishes* – Instead, they asked, *Where do you live?* What kind of request is that, *Where do you live?* Messiah – right here, standing in front of you, and you want to know where he lives? But Jesus answers, *Come and see*, Jesus and over the next three years, he shows them. I live in God. I live in love. I live in *you*.

*** This prophet Isaiah described Israel's relationship to God succinctly: God has *called* you. Yes, it has been painful. Indeed, God sent you to Babylon – exiled you – But this wasn't just punishment, and it plan. Your suffering in exile was intended by God to equip you for destiny, so you could bring hope and peace to the earth. Hence, Isaiah says, you –the people of Israel – have not suffered abstractly, but with purpose.

In fact, suffering often has purpose – in two distinct ways. The first is scorched-earth suffering and purpose. When you suffer, it feels like your world has been burned like a forest, black to the ground. But somehow, blackened coniferous seeds pop open, seedlings sprout, and wildflowers bloom – more beautifully than they ever would have had there been no fire. This type of suffering does not originate with God –Rather, this is the “Life Happens” type of suffering –but by grace, you make something vital of it. I think of the hard parts of my own life in this way – I was raised in an alcoholic family, but that handicap forced me to wrestle, fight, and eventually grow.....With, of course, quite a bit of help from God. With the second type of suffering, God ordains or plans the suffering – for purpose. Think here of Jesus....Ordained as *Lamb of God* from the beginning...That Passover lamb, sacrificed when the Hebrew children fled Egypt – the lamb had to die to save Israel's first born sons.

Remember the Rembrandt painting I've mentioned before? - Of the Nativity. A burst of sunlight shines into the stable, but hidden obscurely in the rays is a cross – Jesus, even at the birth,

destined to suffer, for others. Think also of Mother Theresa, and even Martin Luther King, Jr. -I don't mean his assassination; He suffered far more than that, so others could be free. Ordained suffering, and destiny, a concept that is difficult to accept, yet nonetheless true. But – and this we also know – some suffering in this broken world has no meaning. ...Like the suffering of innocents – a child at the hands of evil, or a mother dying too early of cancer. -Certainly not ordained by God, and having little or no redemptive value.

A story is told about St. Francis and his companion, Brother Leo. They traveled through a very cold, very wet countryside to return home from a trip. On the way, they discussed scenarios in which one would typically expect to find joy, but claimed Francis, joy would not be there. A blind man gaining his sight – no joy in that, said Francis. - Integrity among the people – no joy. - Conversion of infidels, again, no joy. However – continued St. Francis – if he and Brother Leo were to arrive at their destination – at St. Mary of the Angels - in the freezing damp cold, and then – be refused admittance – Worse, if the porter were to come out of the monastery with a club and drive them away – then, said St. Francis, there would be perfect joy. After all, Christ endured similar suffering, and what greater honor, what greater joy – than to follow in his footsteps – But – due respect to St. Francis – this is hogwash. Suffering without purpose is plain darkness – there is no joy there. Jesus suffered so people could live, and learn peace. Israel was exiled so the world might hope. But the suffering Francis described would have no meaning.

* In just a minute, we will baptize four children, and in the process, we will recite our own baptismal vows. Implicit are two promises regarding suffering – First, that you are God's instrument. - If be God's will that you suffer to heal others, you give your consent. *Although* – I should add – living into that promise takes the extraordinary person. And God understands, I think, when we can't be quite so extraordinary. Second, that when we suffer, we will learn, and grow from it. Now, I am betting every parent here is praying that his or her child *not* suffer. But that prayer is not realistic. This is a broken world. And even at an early age, one child will be bullied, while another won't be invited to the neighborhood party. Our job as parents is not to protect our children from every bad thing – it is to teach them how to navigate. How to respond when something bad happens. -To guide them into maturity, not into a superficial adulthood. The two men asked Jesus only one thing: *Where do you live?* They could have asked for anything – But they asked Jesus for that *one* thing that would help them survive pain: To be at home with God. Where do you live? And over three years, Jesus answered them: In love. In God. And In You.