

“I Was Ill and You Cared for Me is a poignant, prayerful, and eminently inspiring meditation on how select biblical passages can be a source of comfort and consolation not only for those who are physically and mentally impaired, but also for their family, friends, and caregivers. Craghan is refreshingly honest about the fear, pain, sorrow, and sense of abandonment that afflict persons who are sick and dying—as well as those who love them—but is also resoundingly hopeful because the God who comes to us in Jesus never abandons us, even in death. Beautifully written and pastorally insightful, *I Was Ill and You Cared for Me* testifies that suffering, diminishment, and death are an inescapable part of life but, thanks to the resurrection, do not triumph. This book is a holy gift for anyone wrestling with the mystery of suffering and searching for reasons to hope.”

—Paul J. Wadell
Professor of Religious Studies
St. Norbert College, De Pere, Wisconsin

“Reflections for those who suffer are many. John Craghan’s direct his thoughts toward those who serve the sufferer. His reflections may have originated in the heart, but he has grounded them in the power and inspiration of the biblical tradition. Relatively short and to the point, they are filled with the sensitivity and empathy that he exhorts. Whether or not one directly serves those who suffer, this book calls all to compassion for human weakness.”

—Dianne Bergant, CSA
Professor of Old Testament Studies
Catholic Theological Union

“John Craghan’s biblical reflections fill a great lacuna because they engage the imaginations of caregivers who pursue a spirituality of service to those who are impaired in some way. Whether we try to imagine our characters from biblical stories or focus on the visual objects and aesthetics of their dwellings, Craghan hits a balanced note of beauty, *praxis*, and compassion with his choices of images and of ways we are privileged to serve. His images are clear, practical, and theologically-based, and so he offers us much more than a script or guide to what to do . . . rather he advises us to imagine ‘how to be’ with these our sisters and brothers.”

—John Endres, SJ
Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley

I Was Ill and You Cared for Me

Biblical Reflections on Serving
the Physically and Mentally Impaired

John F. Craghan



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For
Rosemary Helen
in
solidarity and affection

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Preface

These reflections stem from a variety of venues. Over the years I have observed the dedication and generosity of family members who minister at home to their loved ones suffering from debilitating physical and mental handicaps. I have also learned of the selfless service of hospice teams as they assist the dying and their families in hospitals, nursing facilities, and private homes. Over the last nine months I have visited a close friend, generally once a week, who because of his serious mental illness is now confined to a nursing home. These and similar experiences have led me to ponder the following teaching of Jesus: “I was . . . ill and you cared for me” (Matt 25:35-36). (This is part of Jesus’ judgment of the nations [Matt 25:31-46] in which salvation or damnation depends on recognizing or not recognizing Jesus in the hungry, thirsty, etc.) I seek, therefore, to investigate the biblical resources that may speak to the challenge of caring for those physically and mentally impaired.

I frankly admit that I have very little expertise in clinical psychology or psychiatry. By training I am a biblicist, a person who has spent a lifetime studying the Sacred Scriptures. In this little work I offer the reader a variety of biblical reflections that may help family members, friends, and health care workers deal with the diminished physical and mental conditions of those they love and serve. I am fully aware of my limitations in this endeavor. To be sure, there are countless other biblical texts and themes that I could

have explored. Nonetheless, I offer these to the reader with the fond hope that they may enrich in some small way their ministry of caring.

I dedicate these reflections to my sister-in-law who by her twice-daily nursing home visits to her husband of over fifty years teaches all of us courage and endurance in both the best of times and the worst of times. I also thank my wife Barbara Lynne for her patient and professional perusal of the manuscript and her many helpful suggestions.

John F. Craghan
Pentecost 2013

Abbreviations for Biblical References

1 Cor	1 Corinthians
1 Kgs	1 Kings
2 Sam	2 Samuel
Exod	Exodus
Gen	Genesis
Isa	Isaiah
Jer	Jeremiah
Lam	Lamentations
Matt	Matthew
Ps(s)	Psalms(s)
Rev	Revelation
Zeph	Zephaniah

Beyond Pity

Entrances

There is a significant contrast between entering the venues of the physically and mentally impaired and other settings. For example, when attending a concert or musical, we notice the excitement of the people, their manner of dress, the warming-up session of the orchestra, and the dimming of the lights. When going to a major league baseball game, we observe the lush green of the infield and outfield, the players taking batting practice or shagging flies, the caps and shirts of the fans that define their team preference, the singing of the national anthem, and finally the announcement to play ball. If attending the pope's Angelus prayer and talk at St. Peter's in Rome, we experience the anxiety of the crowd, the jockeying for position to get a better view, the opening of the windows of the apostolic palace, the lowering of the papal tapestry, and finally the breathtaking appearance of the white-clad pontiff.

All of the above entrances clash with the entrance into the venues of the physically and mentally impaired. In visiting those at home, especially on the first occasion, we sense an eerie quiet. There is no longer the clamor and din of children and grandchildren. If there is music, it is very subdued. When the caregiver warmly greets us, the bravado and zest

of days gone by have vanished. If the venue is a nursing home, we watch the painfully slow movement of many residents in their wheel chairs. We also glimpse the lack of any real emotion in their faces. We may hear moans and groans emanating from their rooms. We conclude that the overall atmosphere is somber. Perhaps it is no exaggeration to say that we are in a kind of twilight zone.

In such settings the haunting cadences of the prophet Jeremiah's picture of the dismantling of creation (the threat of military invasion) comes easily to mind:

I looked at the earth—it was waste and void;
 at the heavens—their light had gone out!
 I looked at the mountains—they were quaking!
 All the hills were crumbling!
 I looked—there was no one;
 even the birds of the air had flown away!
 I looked—the garden land was a wilderness,
 with all its cities destroyed
 before the LORD, before his blazing anger.
 For thus says the LORD:
 The whole earth shall be waste,
 but I will not wholly destroy it.
 Because of this the earth shall mourn,
 the heavens above shall darken;
 I have spoken, I will not change my mind,
 I have decided, I will not turn back. (Jer 4:23-28)

For Jeremiah the world has returned to chaos because of his people's disobedience. Each time the prophet looks at that world, he sees more and more of it returning to its condition prior to creation. The picture is bleak indeed: the disappearance of light, birds, fertility, and humanity. Our visit to the physically and mentally impaired may unfortunately resonate all too well with Jeremiah's gloomy

description. Now the crumbling and quaking do not take place in the mountains or hills. Rather, they are now evident in the person or persons we are visiting. We sense waste and devastation, a reaction that may move us to mourn.

The emergence of the loved one

When visiting a friend or loved one at home, we may receive a welcoming smile but the smile may demand a great effort to delve into his or her memory bank to recognize us. When we see this person either propped up in bed or seated in a comfortable chair supported by pillows, we may begin to think that this is not the person we once knew. The zest for life and laughter has greatly diminished. Our visit is Jeremiah revisited.

If visiting in a nursing home, we may catch a glimpse of our loved one at the end of a long corridor or lying in bed. What a stark contrast with his or her former self. Here, too, the energy and vitality have all disappeared. There is no longer any sense of personal engagement. The clash between before and after is overwhelming. We recall the sharp intellect of days gone by. We remember the dexterity of those fingers and hands in performing a multitude of different hobbies and jobs. We rehearse the accomplishments of the past from manual labor to musical talent. We miss the incessant energy. Without realizing it we are participating in Jeremiah's dismantling of creation.

Whether at home, a hospital, or a nursing facility, we can at times converse but at a radically reduced rate. The effort to articulate his or her thoughts is no doubt considerable. His or her mind is not infrequently focusing on the past so that the words and phrases in no way overlap with the intended conversation. We pause—perhaps reluctantly—and ponder this devastating loss. At this point we can appreciate

the profound emotion expressed in David's elegy or funeral song on the occasion of the deaths of Saul and Jonathan at the hands of the treacherous Philistines:

Alas! the glory of Israel,
 slain upon your heights!
 How can the warriors have fallen! . . .
 Saul and Jonathan, beloved and dear,
 separated neither in life nor death,
 swifter than eagles, stronger than lions!
 Women of Israel, weep over Saul,
 who clothed you in scarlet and in finery,
 covered your clothing with ornaments of gold.
 How can the warriors have fallen
 in the thick of battle!
 Jonathan—slain upon your heights!
 I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother!
 Most dear have you been to me; . . .
 How can the warriors have fallen,
 the weapons of war have perished!
 (2 Sam 1:19, 23-25, 26a, 27)

The refrain (“How can the warriors have fallen!”) appears all too appropriate. The whole scenario, whether at home, the hospital, or nursing facility makes absolutely no sense. These once vibrant and energetic people are woefully so much less than their former selves. Like Saul and Jonathan, our warrior friends and loved ones have experienced a form of death whereby everything seems surreal to us.

Because all too frequently our lives revolve around control and power, it may be too difficult to express grief. Frankly, we are losing our once intoxicating sense of control and power. We now confront a situation for which we are not adequately prepared. To make matters worse, we feel that outsiders will simply not understand. They are like the Phi-

listines in David's elegy who cannot begin to imagine what it means to lose a Saul and a Jonathan.

In this flood of conflicting emotions we are too easily tempted to believe that we are totally alone. We cannot begin to fathom that Another stands by in a quiet and unobtrusive way. Yet the biblical message of divine involvement is more than a soothing gesture or quick fix.

To his distraught people the prophet Zephaniah envisions the transforming power of confidence in Jerusalem's future:

Do not fear, Zion,
do not be discouraged!
The LORD, your God, is in your midst,
a mighty savior
Who will rejoice over you with gladness,
and renew you in his love. (Zeph 3:16b-17)

To his exilic audience languishing in Babylon Second Isaiah proclaims: "Fear not, for I am with you" (Isa 43:5a). According to Matthew, Jesus bears the title "Emmanuel" that means "God is with us" (Matt 1:23). In the very last line of the same gospel, the departing Jesus solemnly announces: "And behold, I am with you always" (Matt 28:20). "With" is the preposition of reassuring love. In the midst of our despair and frustration we are challenged to acknowledge One who is ever present despite the deafening sound of silence.

At this stage of our ordeal we are urged to move beyond pity for our loved ones and self-pity for ourselves ("There but for the grace of God go I"). The situation now calls for a demanding strategy that is nothing less than a call to prayer but a form of prayer that is totally honest and hope-oriented. It is time for the prayer of lament.