

Fishing for Faith

A friend bought our children a small fish aquarium for Christmas. A fish aquarium seems like a thoughtful Christmas gift, but it is really a shiny lump of coal in disguise. The problem with fish aquariums is that they are made for aquarium fish. The problem with aquarium fish is that they almost always die within days if not hours of purchase.

I knew this from experience, having suffered as a child at the hands of a similarly well-intentioned friend whose gift of fish caused untold grief. I had equally vivid and painful recollections of hamsters and gerbils and their inconsiderate habit of dying on the very day you name them. But each new generation must learn this for itself, and so we set to work preparing the aquarium for whatever fate awaited its occupants.

The gift came with several accessories—a plastic man in a deep-sea diving suit, a bridge of imitation stone, a water wheel, and a bag of multicolored rocks. To these the children added several ocean shells and a miniature Titanic in two parts, placed at angles on the aquarium floor. Once the water was prepared to the proper pH, we added the remaining ingredient: *fish*—three tiger fish to be exact, lowered into the tank in a plastic bag and released into their new home.

Almost immediately we noticed that the smallest of the fish was swimming with a slight list to the left. “A weak fin,” someone suggested. “He’s dying,” I thought, but said nothing. By evening, the fish, aptly named Nemo, was swimming sideways near the

bottom of the tank. By the next morning, he'd joined the Titanic at its permanent resting place on the surface of the deep. That same day Nemo's brother followed suit, and by bedtime their remaining sibling was swimming solo.

"Stripy's lonely," our children said in their grief. "He needs a friend." So the next day it was off to Uncle Hank's Pet Supply to bring back company. I took along Nemo and his brother in a sandwich bag to make good on Uncle Hank's 50 percent-off dead fish replacement guarantee. Once there, I joined a queue of dads with long faces holding sandwich bags similar to mine. Apparently the replacement policy was not just a marketing ploy but a serious commentary on aquarium fish mortality rates.

Sure enough, back at home we introduced two more tiger fish into the tank only to find Stripy swimming in circles near the bottom, as if picking the right place to lie down and die—which he promptly did, to the renewed anguish of our children.

By now I was blaming our family friend for these woes, speculating whether next Christmas it might be a hamster or a gerbil. Our kids, however, were taking a different tack, one I had not expected. In their nightly prayers, they were beginning to direct their indignation at God.

"Why are the fish dying, God?" they wailed. "What did *they* do? We want them back—but would you at least promise the new ones won't die!"

"Another guarantee!" I thought. "Next thing, they'll be referring to God as 'Uncle Hank!'"

I was inclined at first to put a stop to such passions. This was no way to talk to God. For starters it seemed irreverent. Prayer was for praise, not complaint. Moreover, it was misguided. Holding God responsible for the deaths of three tiger fish was absurd.

But then it came to me that, in their prayers, my children had stumbled upon one of the richest but most overlooked aspects of our Judeo-Christian heritage: *lament*.

To lament something is to regret that it happened. To express lament to *God* is to claim that our sorrows are profoundly God's business. On the other hand, we have taught our children to pray with happy faces, to either be thankful or keep quiet. "No one listens to a whiner!" we have preached; yet, according to the scriptures, *God* does! Fully one-third of the Book of Psalms is lament, prayers of David and Israel expressing grievances to God. "Here my voice, O God, in my complaint,"¹ "All day long you are plotting our destruction,"² "O God, you have rejected us."³ The prophet Jeremiah's grumblings to God are so prevalent that the term "jeremiad" was coined just to name them. And the sad dirges to God after the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon warrant their own book—by the title of *Lamentations*!

Is the Bible right, though, to do these things? Are we moderns comfortable placing blame for every sad affair at the feet of the divine? Or is tragedy simply tragedy, with no intrinsic purpose beyond that which we ascribe to it as we live forward?

My children seem untroubled by such questions. They speak to God not with a tone of blame but with an air of trust. Their prayer of lament is not some appeal for a pet fish's resuscitation. They understand that fish don't rise from the dead. Instead, they turn to God because that is what prayer is for. If they may not express their deepest displeasure to God, then to whom could such words really matter?

¹ Psalm 64:1

² Psalm 52:2

³ Psalm 60

So they pay God the compliment of an invitation into their grief. They invoke God's presence and care as they nurse their indignation over life's cruelty, and God becomes more to them than they had before known.

To speak to God from the heart about what is wrong with the world, to refuse to whitewash human pain, to tell God how you really feel—these acts take courage at any age. But more than calling for courage, lament demands faith. Only one who trusts God's receptive, responsive love could dare or bother to speak so frankly.

My children's prayers of lament for fish give me hope. I've often bristled at the language of divine providence that finds comfort in holding God responsible for every raw act of evil—God who afflicts with cancer, God who wills cars to collide, God who whips up tornados over small towns or rains down volcanic ash on tiny island hamlets, God who knows best and must have good cause. Such a God seems at best aloof and at worst unspeakably cruel. Such a God may be the purveyor of power, but not the Lord of love.

No, I don't believe God wills aquarium fish to swim to the bottom and expire, but neither do I think we should shelter our children from death's inevitability. If God created a world in which death is present, then God above all others should hear from us when death breaks our hearts. And so I'm glad to hear my children ranting to God about departed fish. From what I can tell, "the way of all fish" may be a good child's lesson in "the way of all flesh." And at least one thing is worse than a tank with no fish—a faith with no soul.

I suppose our friend gets credit for helping us see that! But next Christmas, if he brings us hamsters or gerbils, I'm already planning to give them back.