

Wild fire: Sunday, November 11. Job 19: 23-27a.

by [Michael Battle](#) in the [October 17, 2001](#) issue

*“For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth ; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God” (Job 19: 25-27a).*

Job sees God as fire. In God’s presence, Job’s skin burns away, yet he remains intact to behold God for himself. It is the mystery of T. S. Eliot’s two kinds of fire in *The Four Quartets*. One fire consumes while the other purifies. For Job, to step into God’s presence is to be purified in order that “in my flesh I shall see God.” This is the traditional, threefold mystical way of purgation, illumination and union. We must first endure the suffering that comes as we withdraw from evil and sin in order to see God, and then we can participate in union with God.

It is tricky, however, to suggest that suffering as purgation is a necessary step to God. It is deceptive because so many have come before us simply to impose suffering on us. I recently told an Episcopal priest whom I was leading in spiritual direction that until he used the motivation of joy instead of guilt, he would never be able to stop smoking. But Job’s situation was different. He tells us that his body was *literally* smoking from affliction.

Throughout history, human suffering has been so severe that St. Teresa of Ávila cried to God, “No wonder your friends are so few, considering how you treat them.” The age-old question is “Why does God allow suffering?” The age-old answer is that we are called not to escape reality through an illusory existence, but to endure suffering as participation in the salvation of the world. Perhaps Karl Marx was right in describing Western Christians as being on drugs, unable to effect systemic change in the real world. He is wrong, however, when Christians, like Job, envision how God’s very presence demands systemic change on earth. When we see God, we Christians are enflamed and cannot escape sharing the suffering of our neighbors. To live in God is to live in wild fire, uncontained, as it purifies the powers and principalities of the world.

And so when a church suffers, one may see the strange reality of that church caught on fire as God transforms its people into the salt of the earth. Like Job, when we suffer we catch a better glimpse of God: “. . . then in my flesh I shall see God.” While on fire, the worst thing we can do as the church is cut and run for our lives, thinking somehow the fire will be blown out by our running away. Running from our responsibilities of peacemaking and reconciliation only makes the fire spread more. What we need is an enveloping presence, one that surrounds us like a blanket, for if we fail in living into presence for the sake of the world, in some sense God also fails.

The church often supports oppressive political and military regimes, thus turning Christ’s suffering into a destructive reality, a civil religion supportive only of the rich and powerful. Of course, in the end this is not God, but an idol used to rally the masses to war. As Christians, we must correct the delusions about God’s image. As Job states, “After my skin has been thus destroyed . . . I shall see God.” In other words, our suffering strips away the false gods and false selves who make claims on being the living God. We are then led to union with God. We should not create suffering nor should we impose it on others. But we participate in the suffering of the world in such a way as to end others’ suffering.

Desmond Tutu loves a book of cartoons by Mel Calman titled *My God*. Tutu describes one cartoon that shows God looking disconsolate as he reads a poster that says, “God is dead.”

“That,” God remarks, “makes me feel insecure.”

Perhaps I should feel insecure in making the claim that Christians are called to suffer, but consider the vision of Job, who sees God only “after my skin has been thus destroyed.” And so I must claim that we are called to suffer if we want to see the living God. Until then we will only see false gods running amok, creating havoc and setting a consuming fire to the world. Just flip the remote control, or pick your favorite war or attend church conventions. These gods live in the contradictions. These gods live in military badges. These gods live in racial profiling. And these gods live in economic markets that exploit poorer nations.

We learn to worship the God in Christ by participating in Christ’s suffering. Our image of God is better revealed “after my skin has been thus destroyed.”

A disciple once came to Abba Joseph, saying, “Father, according as I am able, I keep my little rule, my little fast and my little prayer. I strive to cleanse my mind of all evil

thoughts and my heart of all evil intents. Now, what more should I do?"

Abba Joseph rose up and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He answered, "Why not be totally changed into fire?"

It is a difficult mystery—how participating in God's suffering enables us to survive our current suffering. But this mystery informs our ultimate knowledge that our suffering is not capricious, but leads to the day of union with a God who is fire.