

We're going to do something a bit different today – an experiment in preaching –we're going to essentially take turns preaching the sermon – a sort of dialogue on God and the nature of human suffering. We're going to frame this dialogue around three questions: Why does God allow us to suffer? What does God offer in the face of our suffering? Is that enough? These questions were prompted by one of this morning's lectionary texts, which comes to us from the book of Job. If you are unfamiliar with the story, Job is a man declared to be righteous in the eyes of God. And though he has pleased God, he begins to experience terrible loss and physical suffering. Three friends initially comfort him, but soon they begin to offer rationalizations and justifications for Job's plight. Our reading this morning is one of Job's responses.

Job 19:7-27

Even when I cry out, "Violence!" I am not answered; I call aloud, but there is no justice. He has walled up my way so that I cannot pass, and he has set darkness upon my paths. He has stripped my glory from me, and taken the crown from my head. He breaks me down on every side, and I am gone, he has uprooted my hope like a tree. He has kindled his wrath against me, and counts me as his adversary. His troops come on together; they have thrown up siege-works against me, and encamp around my tent.

'He has put my family far from me, and my acquaintances are wholly estranged from me. My relatives and my close friends have failed me; the guests in my house have forgotten me; my serving-girls count me as a stranger; I have become an alien in their eyes. I call to my servant, but he gives me no answer; I must myself plead with him. My breath is repulsive to my wife; I am loathsome to my own family. Even young children despise me; when I rise, they talk against me. All my intimate friends abhor me, and those whom I loved have turned against me. My bones cling to my skin and to my flesh, and I have escaped by the skin of my teeth. Have pity on me, have pity on me, O you my friends, for the hand of God has touched me! Why do you, like God, pursue me, never satisfied with my flesh?

'O that my words were written down! O that they were inscribed in a book! O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock forever! 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, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!

Why does God allow suffering?

That's the question prompting Job's lament; but he receives no immediate response. There is no justice, no soothing word or comforting platitude that will soothe his soul. His friends are well meaning in their attempts to provide an explanation for why God allows him to experience seemingly senseless suffering. But the story of Job is in part why all such explanations fail. By the end of the story it is Job's friends who stand convicted by their own words and the one who grieves and who cries out to God that is vindicated. He never

finds an answer to the “why”. I wonder if that’s because our faith prompts us toward a different question? We want explanations. We want to know that when someone we love suffers or dies from a terrible illness that such suffering doesn’t render our existence of God’s existence absurd. We want a reason, but for those who are in the midst of suffering, such reasons only become legitimations for the way things are. They give no comfort. They *can* give no comfort.

In our High School Sunday School class, we’ve been asking ourselves how do we make good and moral decisions. I’ve been hoping to show them that that question all depends on what it is that you consider “good” to be. And what we consider good to be has everything to do with what we understand the nature and purpose of human lives to be. The first answer of the Westminster Catechism, tells us that our purpose is “to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” If we believe that to be true – if that’s a valid premise from which we are to live our lives – we are helped to ask a different set of questions about the nature of suffering.

St. Augustine believed that our questions about suffering are put into proper perspective when we understand that we are beings who were created to enjoy our status as creatures. Do you want to say some more about that?

“Man that is born of woman is born to die.” We suffer because we are mortal. One comic used to say, “I want to achieve immortality without dying.” We simply cannot. We must suffer and we must die—because our time is limited. Our bodies are limited. Our minds are limited. And to make things even more complicated, our spirits are eternal. We hop through life with one foot in body and one foot in spirit.

Paul put it this way, “Daily we are wasting away but our spirit is being renewed daily” (2 Cor. 4:16). The truth is simple, but it’s not easy. I suffer because I am a creature: finite, fragile, and vulnerable to disease, decrepitude, and eventual death. Suffering is inevitable, but we do not suffer alone or in vain.

Without God I cannot accept my creatureliness.
Without God I cannot live with such insecurity.
Without God I am a dead man walking.

In fact, even with God I will create other gods to soothe my anxiety and help me feel secure—stocks, bonds, savings, reserve funds, endowments, romantic love, family, friends, work, sports, the list goes on.

Unless God saves me from my fear of being finite, I will worship idols, desperately try to secure myself, and live a life full of fear or false courage.

So, perhaps instead of an answer to the question of why God allows us to suffer, our faith gives us the resources to frame the question a different way: “How does God give voice to the pain we carry?” or more specifically, “in calling the Church into being, how has God created a community capable of absorbing our grief, and who help us to carry it back to God?” That brings us to our second question: “what does God offer in the face of suffering?”

What does God offer in the face of suffering?

God offers salvation. A couple of weeks ago Fred told the story of the leper who came back to express his gratitude for Jesus' gift of healing. On the surface, this is the story of a remarkable physical healing – but I would suggest that this is a story about salvation and that salvation encompasses the personal, social and cosmic dimensions that refer to everything God wants for us and every way God touches our lives. The man's leprosy had made him a social outcast, cut off from the very sources of his identity – family, religion, work, friendships – he was now known by one thing: his leprosy, and that, it was believed, was a sure sign of his alienation from God. In cleansing the man of his leprosy, Jesus did not simply heal the man; he brought salvation and showed that the logic of God's kingdom transcends the categories we make of outsider and insider. He brought the man healing – he brought all of Israel, including the ten lepers a sign and foretaste of salvation. In the New Testament, healing and salvation are almost always the same thing.

Charlie said I should tell a story about an encounter I had with a man in Northern Ireland. One of my primary ministry responsibilities there was to conduct weekly visits in the four main hospitals around Belfast, Bangor, and Dundonald. For those who have spent any amount of time in one, you know that hospitals are places where time becomes elastic. There are days that pass in a blink and there are hours that seem like weeks. Within the first few weeks of my charge I drove out to the Ulster Hospital to see a perfectly delightful man named Cyril McCready who suffered from the kind of chronic lung disease that left him unable to do much of anything without a supply of oxygen nearby. After I had spent some time in conversation with him, I asked if we could pray together. He was glad to do so, so I prayed that he would find the strength to endure, the courage to face what come ahead and for wisdom for the medical staff that cared for him and said amen. I opened my eyes and after a few moments he did as well. As we said our goodbyes and then he said something to me I'll never forget. "Thank you for coming to see me. I haven't seen anyone for a while. On your next visit, will you pray that God will heal me."

Ever since I've wondered whether my prior reticence to pray for healing was a lack of faith on my part – a desire to protect others from disappointment. I suspect, perhaps more than anything else it was an urge to protect God from my own anger and despair and terror. I'm not saying that if I'd prayed for healing that Cyril would have gotten better.

But I am saying that if *salvation* is what the gospel is about, then healing is something we pray for, and that my reluctance to do so was more about self-protection and a misguided God-protection than it was about faith. Cyril reminded me that one of the most precious gifts of discipleship lies in the fact that we get to carry each other's burdens and hopes and aspirations toward God. Sometimes we aspire for healing, but our hope is that God bring's salvation. Salvation and healing don't always come together, but they're wrapped up in one another. Sometimes salvation takes the form healing, but sometimes salvation is already so close. God always brings salvation.

One of the ways we see the salvation of God's kingdom at work is in the fact that in the church, God has called into being a community that suffers with us. Suffering creates a silence in our lives that is not easily shared. It is only as we are able to locate our lives in

relation to those whose lives manifest God's glory that we are graced with the resources necessary to name our silences.

God offers us the gift of a community, but what else does God offer in the face of suffering? Again, the answer is simple, but not easy.

God offers HIMSELF. No more. No Less. No collecting \$200 or passing "go". No "get out of jail free". No drawing from "community chest". God offers only Himself.

Creator
Sustainer
Redeemer
Father
Son
Holy Spirit

The problem for finite creatures like us is that God is a spirit invisible, intangible, who must be worshipped in Spirit and in truth. We want more—something with flesh, something substantive, something real. In suffering I try to reach up and bring God down. Sadly, in the very midst of my suffering, I feel removed from God. So God must descend to me.

God must show Himself the way God showed Himself to Job—in the midst of the whirlwind. This is what I long for: to be brought into the presence of God.

Sometimes the Word of God spoken or sung or proclaimed brings me into the presence of God. Sometimes being surrounded by brothers and sisters in Christ brings me into the presence of God. Sometimes sharing the broken body and spilled blood of Christ brings me into the presence of God. Sometimes the very suffering itself brings me into the presence of God because I find in my crucifixion, Christ's crucifixion and in His resurrection, I find my resurrection. Now and then, here and there.

More of the time just knowing that in life and death I belong to God gets me through the dark nights of the soul. I also believe that when it's darkest, you can see the stars, especially the star of Bethlehem.

Paul's counsel to the Galatian Church to "bear one another's burdens" is not meant to function as a substitute for God. We "bear each other's burdens" because Jesus has already bore *your burden*. By allowing those who suffer to share their silences we bear Christ – which is another way of saying that we participate in the salvation that Jesus offers here and now. The Lutheran theologian, Jürgen Moltman wrote in *The Crucified God*, "As far as I am concerned, the Christian church and Christian theology become relevant to the problems of the modern world only when they reveal the "hard core" of their identity in the crucified Christ and through [the cross] are called into question." The church's effectiveness in answering the question of suffering lay not in what sort of theologizing it can do to make sense of suffering, but in how it expresses its faith, how it organizes its very life together in order to take suffering upon itself.

Charlie, is the church offering herself in suffering for others as an example and model of Christ's suffering enough to sustain us in our suffering?

Is that Enough?

Possibly because I did not know love as a child, I settle too easily for what some people would think of as crumbs.

In *Night*, Elie Weisel writes about being in a German concentration camp where the Nazi Commandant was hanging two Jewish prisoners every day. He vowed that he would continue this until someone told him how two prisoners had managed to escape. To add to the cruelty, the inmates were forced to witness these executions. One day then hung an old man next to a young boy. The old man, because of his decrepitude and infirmity died quickly. The young boy, however, because he weighed so little, writhed in pain on the gallows for hours. As he suffered the agony of dying, a voice arose from the crowd, "Where is God in all of this?"

A second faint voice from the back of the witnesses responded, "There He is. He is hanging from the gallows."

To know that God is suffering with me,
To know that Christ is feeling my pain with me,
To know that the Spirit joins me in pain,

This is enough for me. To know that my Redeemer lives and stands with me, this is enough. I wonder, is it enough for you, Steven?

God in the gallows is a powerful image. When I first read Wiesel, I was shaken to my foundations. A community of that is willing to share in our suffering, you may say, is a good and worthy thing, but if that's all God offers us – the assurance that we are not alone in the temporal sense, how is that enough to sustain us as we journey into the unknown?

A god who merely comes and embraces our suffering and by doing so is killed by our injustice, only to lay dead in the tomb does not do the world any good. We are an Easter people and Good Friday is not the end of our story. The God whose suffering transforms the suffering of the world into something beautiful called eternal life is the very God who offers the hope of salvation. Our only hope lies in whether we can place alongside the story of our pointless suffering a story of suffering that shows us we are *never* abandoned. A story that reminds us in all of our pain that neither it nor death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. That *is* our story. Suffering is never the final word; God's salvation is.