

Peace in the Valley
“Valley of Suffering”
Isaiah 53: 1-6

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At the tender age of 18, I was appointed to my first church. On Saturday following my first Sunday there, the main man in that congregation, a husband, a father, a grand-father, a leader in the community was killed in a tragic farming accident. Without a single course in theology or pastoral care, I was confronted with the question, “Why do people suffer?” My simple answer as a teenager was “I don’t know.” The number one question people would ask God if they could be assured of an answer is “Why do people suffer?” I will not attempt to answer that question in this sermon. Instead, I want to offer some thoughts that I know to be true. Among them are these:

SUFFERING HAPPENS

“Never morning wears to evening but some heart breaks, a heart just as sensitive as yours and mine.”

Suffering comes to the just and the unjust. It is no respecter of persons. Several years ago, I preached a sermon entitled “Life Is Not Fair.” In that sermon, I flippantly said, “Life is not fair—get over it.”

That night I held a mother in my arms as she absorbed the news that her 16 year-old daughter has been killed in an automobile accident. Through her tears, she looked me in the eye and said, “Life is not fair, but I’ll never get over it.” Suffering happens.

Some suffering is public. College students at Union University hover together in their dorms as the buildings around them literally blow away. The wind snatches a baby out of her mother’s arms as the mother is crushed under the debris. Roadside bombs kill whole families in Iraq. A father grieves the fact that his son got a one way ticket to this war.

Some suffering is private. A teenager does not feel secure. A husband and wife have watched their love for each other disintegrate over the years. A wealthy business woman realizes people are more interested in her money than they are in her. A gay man or woman feels isolated from family and friends. The news from the doctor is not good.

To suffer or not to suffer, that is not the question. The Bible never flinches in its assumption that human beings suffer. Not even Job found an answer to the riddle of why. So the question is not “why” but “what.” “What shall we do with the suffering that happens to us?” - Ah, that is the question.

We can change the things we can. We can fight suffering. We can find cures for diseases and stand for justice in the marketplaces of the world. We can try to take care of ourselves and others. We can drop more bread and fewer bombs. We can learn to live together as human beings. We can feed the hungry and care for the dying. We can build affordable houses and educate children.

We can accept the things that cannot be changed. Our biggest problem with suffering is loss of control. It is a sobering reminder that we are not now, nor ever were, calling the shots. Adding insult to injury is not only the fact that we can't control suffering, we can't even comprehend it. Here we are brushing up against a life process that we did not create, would not choose, and cannot comprehend. It is an insult to human reason. That is the point. The road to peace in the midst of suffering is the road of surrender. Life is a matter of small surrenders which prepare us for the ultimate event of "turning loose" which is death. If this weight can be accepted, it can teach us to love and live in ways we never imagined. It can free us to sing the Hallelujah Chorus in the midst of grief and affirm the goodness and mercy of the Lord in the valley of death.

COMFORT COMES

This much I know about suffering. Our weak hands are caught up and held by other hands, and underneath it all we find the everlasting arms of God.

Comfort comes from compassionate people. The Bible says, "*Be compassionate, even as your Father in heaven is compassionate.*"

To be compassionate means to "suffer with" another. A compassionate person says, I cannot take your pain away or solve all your problems, but I can promise that I will stand with you in solidarity as you fight this foe, and I will hold you up to the Lord as well as I can.

Dalai Lama, the spiritual and political leader of Tibet, suffered so much from the Chinese who ravaged his land and murdered his people, yet he continues to radiate peace and joy. Someone asked the great spiritual leader how it was possible that a man subjected to so much persecution could avoid being filled with anger and a desire for revenge? The Dalai Lama replied, "In my meditation I allow all the suffering of my people to enter into the depth of my heart, and there to be transformed into compassion."

Now, let me give just a word of caution to compassionate people. Few of us are spiritual giants like the Dalai Lama. The daily bombardment of starving babies, dying soldiers, tornadoed houses, flooded villages, wrecked cars, murdered teenagers, can lead us to psychic numbness or even repressed anger. We cannot bear these burdens alone. That's why we need the Church to be the body of Christ. We can do together what is overwhelming to try alone. We need the wisdom of like-minded people to discern God's will and make compassionate responses to the pain of the world. In times of trouble, people need to hold hands, and stick together, and unite in prayer.

For ultimate comfort comes from our Suffering God. *“Surely He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering”* (Isaiah 53:4). Ultimately, we must take our burdens to the Lord and leave them there.

How odd of God to be omnipotent yet suffer with us. But isn't that what “God with us” in the person of Jesus Christ taught us by his life, death, and resurrection?

Compassion means going directly to those people and places where suffering is most acute and building a home there. That's what God did. His compassion is total, absolute, unconditional, and without reservation. Wherever Jesus encountered suffering he was “moved with compassion.” Translated literally that phrase means “Jesus felt it in the gut.”

At Golgotha, the place of the Skull, where human remains were scattered on the ground, He was crucified. Can a church be Christian that shuns the Cross?

The Catholics say in the creed, “He descended to hell.” I think they may be right, at least I've found Him present in the hell of my life. His promise continues, *“Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”*

George Buttrick tells about sitting by a hospital bed as a man was moaning in his misery. Finally, the man stopped moaning and asked, “Did Jesus hurt?” “Yes,” replied Buttrick, “Jesus not only hurt in and for our hurt. God raised him from the dead.” Slowly a sense of quietness and peace filled the room.

RESURRECTION WINS

“Jesus said, ‘I am the resurrection and the life’” (John 11:25).

“We are dust and to dust we shall return. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory.”

Almost all religions teach some form of immortality. Most people believe in some kind of soulful existence after death, but Christianity teaches something distinctly different from other religions and the unexplored assumptions of most people. We believe in the “resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.”

God trumps death with life, not some vague, shadowy existence of the soul in the great sea of all humanity, but real life, individual life, bodily life, a kind of life that's hard to imagine on this side of the grave.

None of this may be significant to you who are busy making a living, raising a family, trying to hold things together here, but one of these days when your troubles and struggles are o'er, your going to want to know what it's like on that

other shore. Let me assure you it's "full of life," life abundant, life eternal, life as it was meant to be; free of sin and not ravaged by disease.

It takes a leap of faith to embrace the resurrection. You who are parents know it takes a leap of faith to bring a child into the world. Oh yes, I know there's some sex involved, and a fetus that develops, but the physical aspects hardly do justice to the wonder of a brand new life, or the joy that a living being brings to a family. Just as there are labor pains involved in the birth of a child, so suffering seems to be a given in our transition into heaven, Or as St. Paul put it, *"The whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time...as we eagerly wait for our adoption as children and the redemption of our bodies."*

It takes a leap of faith, but the God who knew us before time began, who willed us into being, will also give us an embodied life for eternity. We believe in the resurrection!

Sing with all the saints of glory, sing the resurrection song!
Death and sorrow, earth's dark story, to the former days belong.
All around the clouds are breaking, soon the storms of time shall cease;
In God's likeness we awaking, know the everlasting peace.