

Sermon “God of Suffering”
Kirk of St James
Sunday February 18, 2024
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Grayson has an amazing memory, and often hears phrases that he likes and tucks them away for use at a later time. So, on Thursday when school was cancelled, I had to bundle up the boys to go pick up Chad from work. While standing outside the car Grayson yelled “Hurry up Mommy, I am not built for this weather.” I am not sure where he heard that line before but, he used it perfectly! I believe a lot of Canadians feel a certain amount of suffering in the winter whether from cold, shoveling, or another unrelenting snowstorm!

Today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent, a period that is often tied in with themes of suffering, introspection, or even abstaining from things, for the same length of time Jesus was in the wilderness. It is a time of year where some try to “give up” things that they like as a way of fasting and trying to identify with Christ who fasted in the wilderness for forty days. For example, I have been known to try giving up things like chips, or desert during this time of year. We might try to incorporate specific practices like prayer, bible reading, or devotions to help us grow in our faith. There is also the reverse fast where instead of giving things up we do things like an act of kindness a day. Whatever we may do or try, the Lent is a period of time where we are encouraged to break from normal habits and routines and try something different.

While wondering how to begin lent there are a lot of themes to be found in 1 Peter. As one scholar said we don’t want to try and tackle them all at the same time with an overstuffed sermon that will cause your congregation to feel like they have to sit through all forty days at

once. Therefore, there is one thread I would like to pull out for today to examine as we begin Lent, and that is suffering.

Suffering is something we do not often talk about in our society, and something we rightly want to avoid experiencing in lives. That being said, it is something we will all contend with during our lifetime. In the context of our scripture passage today this letter in 1 Peter was written to Christians in Asia Minor who were suffering because of their faith. The writer was encouraging them to keep hope and faith in the face of persecution. Their suffering was caused because they lived according to Christian values in the midst of a culture who looked down on such beliefs. While we cannot always remove the cause of our suffering, for these early Christians the temptation to abandon their faith to avoid this type of persecution must have been strong. I often wish we had the responses to these pastoral letters, to hear how the believers were affected by the encouragement sent to them.

We all must choose how to deal with suffering when it comes our way, and how we make sense of it in light of our faith. While responses are varied there are a couple things I would like to address about suffering from a Christian perspective. The first is that one approach is to make suffering not just something to be endured but to also embrace it as a spiritual discipline. This can lead to harmful beliefs and practices. For example, self-flagellation, self-denial, wearing of painful or uncomfortable garments etc. The idea being we can better relate to the sufferings of Christ through suffering ourselves. Another way we might see this in society is people using it for justification to stay with an abuser. It actually came up this week in the Presbyterian Reads book study on Julian of Norwich, where it looked at the suffering of Jesus being used to legitimate the suffering of others. When one person questioned what this means the leader of the

book study Emily Bisset gave the example, “I interpreted it through the lens of domestic violence, where a person, often a woman although not exclusively, is convinced that suffering is a necessary part of love. In this kind of situation, a person can be made to feel (sometimes even by the church) that the suffering they are experiencing is somehow justified by Jesus' own willingness to suffer. In such relationships, perpetrators of abuse ask for and expect forgiveness after the fact and Christian faith can be manipulated to make the victim of abuse believe that such forgiveness is what Jesus expects. This pattern or cycle perpetuates the abuse. Some brands of Christianity tell victims that staying in a marriage, for example, is a higher priority than leaving an abusive relationship. And, tragically, the call "to suffer as Jesus did for the sake of love." is used as reason for this. Let me be clear, abuse is never the will of God.” Christ did not suffer in order to bring more suffering upon us. Christ suffered 1) so that we do not suffer eternally 2) In order to walk alongside humanity.

Another view that can creep in when we talk about suffering is that it is the will of God. One writer pointed out that “If God causes suffering, which is often unpredictable and undeserved, then God becomes an arbitrary and capricious Lord who does not appear to love us. Can you put your trust in such a God?” I wonder sometimes if some of this rises out of our feeling of wanting things—even if they are difficult--to have meaning. So, for example, my dad having cancer and eventually dying. One way to try and make sense of it would be to say, “well we don’t understand, but it was the will of God.” A powerful preacher named William Sloan Coffin Jr. once preached a sermon after his son died in a car accident and he said in part “...God doesn’t go around this world with his fingers on triggers, his fist around knives, his hands on steering wheels. God is dead set against all unnatural deaths. And Christ spent an inordinate

amount of time delivering people from paralysis, insanity, leprosy and muteness...My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break."

I deeply appreciate the view of theologian Roberto Goizueta who describes the work of Jesus as "accompaniment." Through the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, he becomes the one who walks with us. There is nothing that we experience in this life for better or worse, that is unknown by Christ. That is part of what we do as a community as well. When people suffer, we do our best to sit with them, to hold them, and to be present for them. Sometimes catastrophic loss leaves us feeling powerless, that human suffering exceeds our capacity to comprehend and respond. I know watching events unfold in Israel and Palestine for example is simply overwhelming. Our hearts broke for families killed and taken hostage by Hamas, and our hearts break for innocent Palestinians who are dying daily. Sometimes the best we can offer is to not turn away from the pain of others but, to bear witness.

The topic of suffering is difficult, and we all do our best to make sense of it, in the ways we are able to. It is also something we may go through different ways of understanding, depending on our circumstances and experiences. But if I were to write you a pastoral letter, like our writer did in Peter today I would say, "You are known, and you are loved. God sees you and your circumstances, God hears you, and knows the cries of your heart. In whatever ways you are suffering this Lenten season, Jesus accompanies you. And for those around you who are suffering, listen, help where you are able, and bear witness even when it is difficult." Through these Lenten days and nights, may we find what we need, and walk with those who need support.