

“When Suffering Persists”

Neil Engle
August 26, 2007
Text: Psalms 22:1-11; II Corinthians 12:1-10

First Christian Church
115 Courthouse Plaza
Manhattan, Kansas 66502

Do you ever feel as if you're in the midst of a season of senseless assault? There is suffering all around, everywhere we turn.

Miners lost in this country, three killed trying to reach six trapped.
180 miners lost in China, mine was flooded.
Earthquake in Peru.
Hurricanes.
Floods in Minnesota, Oklahoma, Ohio, and Illinois.
Tornado in Michigan.
Bombings in Iraq.
Destruction away from home.
Disease and pain here at home, even within our own congregation.

Many of us find ourselves asking questions. Why? Why is this happening? Why is this happening to me? To people I love? Remember that it's okay to ask questions, especially of God – if we look at the Biblical witness, we can dare say that the gates of heaven have been stormed by such questions. We're familiar with Job's questioning of God. There was the prophet Habakkuk – 2600 years ago – who lived in a time of moral corruption within his own country and of military threat from neighboring nations. Habakkuk pleads for help from God for a long time and nothing changes. God neither hears nor acts, apparently, prompting Habakkuk to declare, “How long shall I cry for help and you won't hear me? How long must I cry violence and you won't save?”

Many of the psalms fire complaints at God – they hold God responsible for suffering and anguish. That sort of approach is reflected in Connie Willis' novel *Doomsday Book*. She reflects on the ravages of the Black Death in the 14th century. “It was God who should have to beg forgiveness.” Today's text is one of those psalms that calls God to account. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but find no rest.”

You may recognize the first verse, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The Gospels report Jesus uttered these words on the cross. Jesus knew the Hebrew scripture. In His suffering, He echoed the words of the Psalmist who himself was in anguish – words of despair – God, why have you forgotten about me? Have not these words at one time or another been our words?

Madeline L'Engle, during her husband's terminal illness wrote:

At bedtime, in a cold, strange room, I read Evening Prayer. Read the first Psalm for the evening of the fourth day: “**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**” Exquisitely painful timing. The psalmist's words. Jesus' words. I feel anguished. I feel that I have been kicked in the stomach and the wind knocked out of me. My spirit hurts. I am grateful that Jesus cried out those words, because it means that I need never fear to cry them out myself. I need never fear, nor feel any sense of guilt, during the inevitable moments of forsakenness. They come to us all. They are part of the soul's growth.

We've all been in moments of despair – dark nights of the soul – when suffering often seems to be closing in, when we feel like grabbing God by the lapels and shouting, “Why? What in God's name is going on?” Is there not some comforting word that can be spoken? Is there not something that can be said that will help ease the pain? That will bring a ray of light to our darkness? Yes. Yes there is. The words don't involve a guarantee to end all pain. What can be said doesn't speak of a miracle cure – a guarantee and cures aren't where it's at. However, there is abundant evidence that pain can be penetrated by a healing touch.

The healing touch is the touch of God – God is in the healing business. Sometimes that healing touch is medical in character. The right therapy, the correct medication, the needed surgery – sometimes our physical condition is addressed through modern medicine and suffering ceases. As I look among you today, I see many who have benefited from such treatment. Sometimes God's healing touch is felt in that manner. But not all our suffering or pain that is physical will respond to medical treatment. And not all of our suffering or pain, “our thorns in the flesh,” as Paul says, are physically treatable. Is there a word of hope here as well?

Again, yes there is, but let me say a word about the thorns. A thorn may be entirely psychological – like the prophet Jeremiah’s overwhelming sense of his own insufficiency. A thorn may be one of grief – for the pointless death of a child, husband, wife. A thorn may be one of betrayal. In Arthur Miller’s *After the Fall*, one of the characters says, “O God, why is betrayal the only truth that sticks?”

A thorn can also be a divorce, long past, that still poisons the bloodstream of our lives. A thorn can be a child we think has disgraced us, or one we think we have disgraced. A thorn can be any lapse of judgment or mistake. Thorns are what we’re stuck with – we cannot extract them and they all cause pain. Yet I suggest that the pain can be penetrated by a healing touch no less than the physical pain can be touched through medicine. Haven’t we all experienced it? The easing of pain through words spoken: “I forgive you” – how liberating and pain reducing that can be. “I still believe in you.” “We’ll always love you no matter what.” Or even just the words, “We need to talk.”

God can penetrate our personal pain in different ways: spoken words, the touch of a caring person, embrace of someone close to us. Sometimes the awareness of the Holy Spirit – recognition that God is present – is the healing touch we need. For those that suffer critical illnesses, without any physical cures, the rest that death brings is God’s healing. Someone said, “Of all the happiness a person can gain, comes not from pleasure, but rest from pain.” Peace and rest that accompany death are God’s healing agents. The assurance of entering into the very presence of God at the time of death – the gift of eternal life – are not these ways that God ministers to us in our suffering?

I would suggest that it is with humble hope and joyful expectation that we approach God with our thorns in the flesh. We affirm that we expect the healing touch: as a community of faith, we expect healing to take place every time the gospel is preached. Neil, you mean that every time you get up into that pulpit, and you preach one of your sermons, are you saying that somebody will be healed? That is exactly what I’m saying. Not because of my word, but because the Word is being proclaimed – that Word has power – God through the Word and words can find a way to heal at least one person! God is in the healing business! Do you remember the hymn *There is a Balm in Gilead!*? “There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin sick soul.” God is in the healing business.

Yet there may be some of us here this morning who believe that God’s healing touch is available, but we’ve not felt it – thorns are still as sharp and painful as they’ve ever been. We pray, we go to church, but the pain is still there.

Now I could speak to that, but the apostle Paul does it much better. Paul wrote the Corinthian church that he had to contend with a thorn in the flesh – a messenger of Satan, sent by God to both him and to curb his arrogant spirit. This is a much contested passage, and explanations for Paul’s thorn in the flesh have ranged from psychological disorders to physical maladies such as bad eyesight, stomach problems, and epilepsy. We don’t know the nature of his ailment, but we do know that Paul earnestly appealed to the Lord for its removal. “Lord, aren’t you going to do something about this?” “Lord, aren’t you going to do something about this?” “Lord, aren’t you going to do something about this?” – only to be told “My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

This revelation from the Lord, more than all his other visions and revelations, provided him with the interpretative key for seeing his own experience. What he knew only too well was that weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities were far more frequent and typical of his apostolic life than were visions and revelations. What’s more, they placed him in more direct touch with the experience of Christ. God’s grace was enough to see him through.

God’s grace is sufficient for us and that is good news! God’s grace will sustain us – that often is all the healing we need. You see, we may never be able to extract the thorn in our flesh – we may be stuck with our situation for the rest of our lives. That doesn’t go down easily with most of us – physical conditions may never get any better, family situations may not improve, our own emotional lives may not be cured. But that doesn’t mean we give up – we don’t just fold our tents and quit. We don’t quit because there is no reason to quit – God will sustain us – God’s grace will see us through. God’s healing touch may not be the removal of pain but the removal of fear and immobilization and paralysis. God will replace them with courage, and strength, and the ability to cope and to live with the suffering, even if it’s only at a time or one hour at a time.

We have reason to push on. We need to keep on praying, we need to keep coming to church. We need to enjoy and be moved by the music, we need to be addressed by scripture. We need to be here because maybe, that’s where we’ll hear that word, maybe here in this sanctuary is where you – where I – will feel God’s healing touch. God will penetrate our pain while we’re in this place.

Most of us can ask, why me? Why did this happen to me? Probably for no good reason – bad things happen to the good and the bad all the time. The notion that only good things happen to good people was put to rest when they hung Jesus on the cross. Now, the same Jesus takes our question – why do bad things happen to good little me? And rephrases it, “Can you trust God – in joy or in pain – to be your God? Can we love God without linking our love to the cards life deals us?” God’s love carries no promises about good or bad, save the promise that God will not allow anything worse to happen to us than happened to God’s own Son.

Julian of Norwich writes: “The words, You will not be overcome, were said very insistently and strongly, for certainty and strength against every tribulation which may come. God did not say: You will not be troubled, you will not be belabored, you will not be disquieted. God said you will not be overcome.”