

Man of Sorrows: Jesus and Our Suffering

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Isaiah 53

We've come to the season of Lent. For all of you who aren't as familiar with how the Christian liturgical calendar works Lent is a season of preparation that comes before Good Friday and Easter. It's a season where we reflect on our sins and on our troubles. To use Jesus' language, it's a season when we pick up our cross and follow him. This year we'll do that by reflecting on the place of suffering in our lives. Our sermon series is called, Man of Sorrows. This series we will go through a variety of Biblical texts that talk about suffering: God's presence in it, our reaction to it, and ultimately how Christ's cross addresses it. This series is based in Scripture, but it is also informed by Tim Keller's book *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*; a book which came out in 2013.

So, over the next 6 weeks, I will deal with suffering. It all sounds so neat and tidy when I lay it out like that. "Over the next 6 weeks, in six, well-polished sermons, we'll address the problem of your agony, your mortal loss, your wrenching pain, your suffering." If only it were that easy. We've lost nine members of our church family in the first 6 weeks of this year. Some of those deaths were expected, some of them were a terrible shock. All of them come with suffering. All of them bring tears and questions. All of them are a tear in the fabric of our lives. I'm not going to tidy up all the pain and perplexity of those losses in 6 20 minute sermons. I wish I could.

Nevertheless, there are things we can say. We will not answer all our agonized questions over the next six weeks, but we will certainly meet them with a strong hope; a hope that, on Easter morning, we will stand over all our agonies and say, "Don't be afraid. I was dead, but now I'm alive and I hold the keys to death and Hades."

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. We all know that when it comes to making sense of our faith as Christians, the amount of suffering in this world is one of our biggest challenges. I've done a couple of profession of faith interviews over the last month, and one of the questions I almost always ask to test the maturity of these young Christian's faith is: 'Why does a good God allow so much suffering in this world? How do you make sense of that?' They usually groan when I ask it, and they groan in a way that shows it's not a new question for them; they've been asking the same question too. So suffering is a challenge for our faith, but it's important to see that suffering isn't just a challenge for Christians; it's a problem for every religion of the world and every person in the world. All people suffer. People of every religion suffer. People who have no religion at all suffer. So we all have to deal with the problem of our suffering. Not only do we have to deal with it, how we handle our suffering becomes a fundamental part of our identity. "How do I process and understand my suffering?" is a central formational question for any human life. Do I accept it? Do I fight it? Do I deny it? Medicate it? Who you are depends on your answer to these questions.

And so, over the years, all cultures, religions and philosophies have given different answers to this critical question. Some people say you should handle it stoically. You've heard that, right? 'He handled his wife's death very stoically.' What do we mean by that? We mean that he wasn't overly emotional. He stayed steady. He was composed and kept functioning and did what needed doing. That's what we mean by stoic.

That modern word comes from the ancient philosophy called stoicism. The stoics had a specific doctrine of suffering and suggestions about how to handle pain. Stoicism was represented by Roman thinkers like Seneca and Cicero, and in their view, suffering and death are not evil; they are just a natural part of the life cycle. So while grief over loss of a loved one was inevitable, it should be moderate and controlled. Tim Keller quotes a famous letter that Seneca the stoic wrote to a woman named Marcia who had lost a son and was torn up by grief. Seneca calls her to master her grief and move on. Here's how Keller describes Seneca's advice 'Nature gives us no promise that we are allowed to keep our loved ones forever or even for long. Though he died young, he avoided many of the troubles of life. Marcia should submit to fate, and not protest or struggle against it.' Moderate your grief. It is not logical to get so worked up about something as natural and inevitable as death.

Seneca and the rest of the Stoics were western thinkers, but a version of their attitude shows up in the way eastern thinkers react to suffering. Stoicism and Buddhism have parallels. In Buddhism suffering comes from desire, suffering comes from being too attached to the things and people in this world.

You maybe see that attitude most clearly in the story of the Buddha himself. As the story goes, Siddhartha Gautama was a prince living in a glorious palace. His Father wanted his son to live a pain free life and so he went to great lengths to protect his son from all suffering. But one day, Prince Siddhartha found his way out of the palace and into the streets of the surrounding city and there he saw four distressing sights, including a sick man, an old man, a dead man and a poor man. Seeing this suffering for the first time shocked him, and he resolved to find the way to live with serenity in the face of the world's suffering. After years of searching he came to his answer while meditating under a tree. His insight? Life is full of suffering, but suffering is an illusion because we are all ultimately united in the one; we cannot lose anything. Suffering comes from desire and craving, so the key is to extinguish desire and craving. Extinguish your desire and craving for the things of the world and you will free yourself from suffering when they are lost. Siddhartha became known as the Buddha and spent the rest of his life seeking the enlightenment that detached him from the sufferings of the world. It's not exactly the same as stoicism, but you can see the similarities. Both schools hold suffering at bay by moderating their attachments.

Do you see how this approach, how this story is completely different from the story of Jesus? Siddhartha detaches so that he won't be subject to the pains of suffering. Compare that to the story of Jesus as prophetically described by the prophet Isaiah. Is this a story of detachment? Read Isaiah 53.

Can you here how different this approach to suffering is? Siddhartha detaches. He tries to minimize suffering's power by detaching himself through meditation that achieves enlightenment. Jesus goes in the opposite direction. Jesus attaches. He attaches himself to human flesh. He moves towards the struggles of life. In Isaiah's prophetic poem, the servant takes on the worst of human suffering. God himself becomes a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Physical pain? He was crushed, pierced and wounded. Rejection? He was despised and rejected by mankind. Shame? People turn their face from him because of his condition. Loneliness? He was cut off from the land of the living. Death? He was assigned a grave with the wicked.

And unlike some of our suffering, his suffering was completely undeserved! He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in his mouth. So the suffering he moves towards is the worst kind of suffering, the kind that is hardest to stomach, the hardest to make sense of; the suffering of the innocent. Think of the horror we feel at the suffering of children. Think of Sandy Hook or Uvalde. Jesus entered into that suffering; the suffering of the innocents. Not only does he suffer all these things, he suffers them on purpose and he suffers them for us. He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed.

Jesus' path is so different! Seneca told Marcia to move on from her grief; Jesus goes down into the grief and loss of all mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers, he sits beside them and cries out with them, "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken us!!" Have you ever been with someone whose pain and grief was so strong that they wailed and even screamed? I have. Some of you have. Maybe some of you have been that person. That's the sound Jesus made when he cried out in forsakenness. That's the grief he entered into.

And then he takes it all upon himself and dies and then three days later rises from the dead. And in so doing he not only moves towards and shares the suffering of all people, by sharing it faithfully, by bearing it even though he was innocent, he destroys its power. Jesus makes this remarkable move: he uses something evil to destroy evil. In God's hands, death and suffering, these things that are products of human sin, become the tools of sin's defeat! Jesus destroys death by death. He defeats sin by becoming sin for us. He destroys the power of suffering by suffering. I'm not here to create contempt for Buddhists and stoics, life is hard, and suffering is terrible, and I have sympathy for anyone who is trying to deal with their pain, but there has never been anyone like Jesus. Jesus is different. This wild love that attaches and holds, and sacrifices and bleeds and weeps and finally overcomes. This is my story. This is my path. This is my savior.

When this is your story and Jesus is your savior, it gives you a unique perspective on your own sufferings. There are two poles that people take when it comes to their suffering. On the one hand you have fatalism. There are religions and cultures that say, suffering is inevitable, it's part of life, just accept it and bear it heroically. That's fatalism. On the other extreme you have fight-ism. That's the instinct to fight pain and

suffering no matter what. This approach avoids pain at any cost, and never stops fighting against suffering. Suffering is always evil and meaningless. Our culture is a lot like that. We have invented every manner of pills and devices to avoid and eliminate pain.

Christians don't fit either of these extremes. We Christians are not fatalistic. We fight against suffering. We know that sin is the source of most of the suffering in the world and we fight against sin and we work to alleviate suffering. We don't detach; we weep with those who weep, we mourn with those who mourn. We don't passively accept. Like Jesus and the Psalmist and Job, we shout our outrage at the heavens. But because in the story of Jesus, God uses Jesus' suffering and death as part of the way he destroys sin, we know that God can be at work in our pain. In the death of Jesus God uses suffering and evil to destroy suffering and evil, so we believe that while much of our pain comes from things that are evil and wrong, we also believe that in all things God is working for the good. We believe that God can take an evil thing that happens to us, work in it, and bring good out of it. And so even if we can't see any good in our pain at all we will rise up every day and praise and hope and love.

This is hard to understand, but when you see it in real life, it makes more sense. In his book, Keller tells the story of a woman named Emily. Emily thought her life was great. She had a husband who said he loved her, four healthy children, a lovely home, a vibrant faith life. Everything seemed in place until one day, out of the blue, her Christian husband walked out on her and the children and went off with another woman. Emily was crushed. Like anyone would, she cried out against the injustice of this pain. She cried out to God. 'How can this be part of your plan!? What good can possibly come of this?' She had to give up her house, her children were devastated, and her whole future had been upended. She recognizes this as evil. And yet she has learned to trust God in the midst of her pain and accept the possibility that God is working in her pain. "I'm not going to be a doormat...[but]I'm going to seek God's plan for my life. I'm going to forgive my husband (though I won't forget)." She says she is sure God will continue to transform her into the person she is meant to be. She yells at God AND she testifies that she can feel God holding her up in the midst of everything. She has hard questions for God AND yet she trusts God to hold her future.

This is life under the cross. This is life in the arms of the Man of Sorrows. This is the life of the people who come to this table, where the wine we drink is both a reminder of an innocent man who was tortured and suffered unspeakable pain AND yet it is also the cup of salvation.

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