Sunday, February 26, 1989
THE CROSS OF JESUS: THE ANSWER TO SUFFERING (No. 3 in a Sermon Series)
Romans 8:18-21; Luke 13:1-5

The phone call came about 3:00 A.M. There had been an armed robbery around midnight at a service station, and the young man who was working there had been shot in the stomach with a sawed-off shotgun. Two hours later, he had died. He was 18 years old, and he and his parents were members of the church I served. The mother of the young man who called me was suffering in a way that I had not experienced before.

A minister was standing in a hospital hallway with a mother and a father whose child had been struck by a rare, often fatal illness. “Your little girl may not make it,” the doctor told the parents. The mother grabbed the minister by the lapels of his jacket, pushed her face close, and said, “All right, preacher, tell me: Why did this happen to our little girl? What have we done to deserve this?” And at that moment, there was no satisfying answer to be found.

The question of suffering is a universal one. For thousands of years, we human beings have wondered why there is suffering among us and if there can be any meaning or purpose in suffering. We often ask, “Why, if God is good, does God permit pain and suffering to exist?” There are no easy or simple answers to such questions.

Jesus had to face similar questions in his own time, and he did not give easy, simple answers. One day, as the scripture reading in Luke tells us, there were people who asked Jesus why some Galileans had been murdered by Pilate. Why did they deserve such a fate? Jesus did not directly answer their question, except to say their suffering was not because they were worse sinners than others. And then Jesus mentioned some other people who had been killed when the Tower of Siloam fell on them, and again, he said it was not because they were bad people. It was not because they deserved to die in this instance. They had the misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

These questions to Jesus covered a wide area of tragedy — suffering caused by human beings to other human beings and natural disasters. The Galileans were outsiders, the victims of cruel and oppressive tyrants. The Jerusalemites were insiders killed by a natural disaster, like millions who have perished in earthquakes, floods, and fires.

Suffering comes to us in a variety of ways. There is physical suffering and mental or spiritual suffering. You can live in a beautiful home in Lincoln and have children who are doing well in school. But if, at the same time, you are being divorced by your spouse of twenty years and know that you are no longer loved and are being specifically, methodically, legally, and publicly rejected, you know what suffering is.

Or you could be a man or woman of fifty who has been told by your employer that you are no longer needed. You could be a man or woman who seems to have everything — business success, social prestige, money, good looks — who nevertheless struggles with some secret sin and guilt and inside, you are suffering more than anyone will ever realize.

There is the suffering of the adolescent who is trying to understand who he or she is and wonders if anyone likes him or her. There is the suffering of the hungry, the homeless, the political prisoner, the refugee, the abused child, the abused wife, and the mother who can’t understand why he or she is the object of so much cruelty and abuse.

There is the suffering of a prolonged and painful illness which brings with it the craving for death. There is the suffering that comes from the untimely death of someone we love. There is the suffering we bear from unjust criticism, gossip, and complaining people. There is the suffering of parents who watch their child get in the wrong crowd, make disastrous decisions, and waste his or her talent and ability.

There are those who work for peace and justice and suffer because of it.

Why bad things happen to good people is a natural question, but Jesus does not answer it. Jesus gathers all violence and suffering together, whether caused by natural calamity or human perversity. It makes no difference to him: evil is evil, hurt is hurt, pain is pain, suffering is suffering.

On another occasion when Jesus was asked why people suffer, he answered, “God makes the sun to shine on the good and the bad; the rain to fall on the just and the unjust.” That’s all. Both the good and the bad get both sun and rain.

Another time the disciples asked, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” And Jesus said, “Neither.” There is not necessarily a direct correlation between sin and the misfortunate, between bad people and bad luck.

Instead, according to the Gospel of Luke, when people questioned Jesus about life’s unfairness, he asked them to examine their own relationship to God. He was implying that the only important question is one’s relationship to God. If that relationship is in order, then any suffering, confusion, or tragedy, even though unfair and undeserved, will be bearable because we trust in a God whose presence makes it so. This is part of the mystery of the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross and how that cross of Jesus is the answer to suffering. This answer has two parts.

First of all, even though the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross does not answer the question of why good people suffer, it is the answer to suffering because it tells us that in our deepest suffering and pain, God is there suffering along with us. God was in Christ on the cross.

The other day I heard a story about a customer who went into a jewelry store to buy a cross necklace. The clerk asked, “Do you want to see a plain one? Or do you want to look at the one with a little man on it?”

We Protestants have emphasized the empty cross, the plain one, as a symbol of Christ’s resurrection, but we need to remember the crucifix as well. Sometimes we miss the point in making the cross antiseptically clean and empty. In the deepest sense, the cross is never empty. God still suffers for us and is with us in all of our suffering.

The cross says that God does not stand at some distance from where we are, shouting encouragement to us, but God is involved in our pain and our hurt. Among all the historic and mystery faiths, only in Christianity is God depicted as suffering. This is at once the surprising, incredible affirmation: God suffers with us. God does not visit suffering upon us but helps to bear the pain that is part and parcel of life.

Have you ever noticed that you will nearly always find that the loudest voices which keep asking, “How can there be a God, and life so tragic and unjust?” belong to the spectators of life’s sufferings and not to the sufferers themselves? You will hardly ever find that the great sufferers are the great skeptics. Indeed, the fact is that it is the world’s greatest sufferers who have produced the most shining examples of unconquerable faith. Why? Because it is in their suffering that they have discovered God suffering with them, and they have an experience of God’s love, presence, and power that can come in no other way. They know as the Psalmist knew, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”

Or take a human situation. What is the most comfort to you? You are suffering deeply, and someone tries to bolster your spirits by saying words of encouragement — all done with the best intentions. Or a friend comes and sits and suffers with you — maybe speaking very few words at all. Does not the friend who suffers with you bring you a comfort far deeper than any words? It is the testimony of the Christian faith that God is even closer than the closest friend. God is in you. And therefore, your sufferings are God’s sufferings. We tend to say so many trite and trivial things in the face of tragedy and suffering. We chirp our bright explanations and talk about “all for the best” and “positive thinking.” The truth is we know only this: That God does not abandon us or leave us alone; God takes part in our pain and helps us to bear the hurt of life.

Secondly, the cross is the answer to suffering not only because we know God suffers with us, but it is also true that we are in it with God, taking part in God’s redemptive activity and God’s victory. God is in it with you, and you are in it with God — that is the message of the cross and part of the cross’s answer to suffering.
To put it another way, the cross is the answer to suffering because the suffering of Jesus on the cross is redemptive, and our unearned suffering can also be redemptive.

Here’s what one father said to his children about unearned suffering and how it can be redemptive: “My children, each of you has something for which the world will make you suffer.”

“Joseph, your spirit is tender; your dreams are too elaborate; your contemplations produce nothing a pragmatic world will pay for or admire. Natural compassion is a liability for you, and you will hurt.”

“Matthew, my adopted son, your skin is black. But your manner is self-assured, and your speech articulate. The world will call that combination arrogance and thus will justify a hundred stupid accusations against you.”

“Mary, you are a woman whose very laughter makes you vulnerable: Joy draws the scorn of the world — or it sounds like susceptibility, and the world will try to use it. Your insight into human souls will embarrass those you seek to serve. Embarrassment will make them angry, and anger vengeful. Vengeance will hurt you.”

“Talitha, the world will count three strikes against you: That you are of mixed races, that you are a woman, and that you are bold.”

“The question, my children, is not whether you will suffer, but how you will suffer. For either you will take the world’s terms as your own and give as good as you get — an eye for an eye, spit for spite, pain in equal measure — either I say you will rage like the world to save yourself, feeling justified in any counterattack and changing nothing whatever under the sun—”

“Or you will find in unearned suffering an opportunity of the spirit.” The presence of Christ in you changes suffering into redemption. And not only for you, but your suffering can contribute to the redemption of others and of the whole creation. That’s the miracle of the cross.

The notion that only good things happen to good people was put to rest when we hung Jesus on the cross. This same Jesus takes our questions about why bad things happen to good people and asks us other questions in return: Can you trust God, in joy and pain, to be your God? Can you let go of your demand that God be God on your terms? Can you love God without linking your love to the cards life deals you?

What is the Christian answer to the mystery of suffering? Not an explanation, but a reinforcing presence. God is in it with you, and you are in it with God. And that means victory. There was victory at the cross for Christ; and God wants you to know that there can be victory at every cross for you. That’s why the Apostle Paul could write: “I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. We know that in everything God works for good with those who love God, who are called according to God’s purpose.” Amen.