Sunday, March 19, 1995
THE MYSTERY OF SUFFERING
Luke 13:1-9

The phone call came around 3:00 in the morning. There had been an armed robbery around midnight at a service station, and the young man working there had been shot in the stomach with a sawed-off shotgun. Two hours later, he died. He was 18 years old, and both he and his parents were members of the church I served. It was the mother of the murdered young man who called me, and she was suffering as she had never suffered before.

A minister was standing in a hospital hallway with a mother and father whose child had been diagnosed with 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 to his, and said, “All right, preacher, tell me, why did this happen to our little girl? What have we done to deserve this?” At that moment, there was no satisfying answer.

The mystery of suffering is universal. For thousands of years, human beings have wondered why there is so much suffering among us and whether any meaning or purpose can be found in our suffering. We ask, “Why, if God is good, does God permit pain and suffering to exist?” There are no easy or simple answers to the mystery of suffering.

Jesus faced the same questions, and He did not offer any easy or simple answers. One day, as a story in Luke remembers it, some people asked Jesus why some innocent Galileans had been murdered by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. What had they done to deserve being killed? Jesus did not directly answer their question, except to say that their suffering was not because they were worse sinners than others. Then Jesus mentioned others who had been killed when the Tower of Siloam fell on them, and again, He said it was not because they were more sinful than others. It was not because they were being punished. They had the misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

It’s the same with the people who were killed this past week in the floods in California. Some were driving along in their cars, and a bridge was destroyed, causing them to crash to their deaths.

Suffering comes to us in various ways. There is physical suffering and mental or spiritual suffering. You can live in a beautiful home 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 you know that you are no longer loved, feeling that you are being methodically, legally, and publicly rejected, you know what suffering is.

Or you could be a man or woman of fifty who is told by your employer that you are no longer needed. You could be a person who seems to have everything — business success, social prestige, money, good looks — yet still struggle with some secret sin and guilt, suffering more than anyone will ever realize. A lot of suffering is hidden. There is the suffering of the adolescent who is trying to understand who they are and wonders if anyone likes them.

There is the suffering of the hungry, the homeless, the political prisoner, the refugee, the abused child, the abused spouse who can’t understand why they are 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. And there is the suffering of those who stand by the bedside and watch someone they love writhe in pain.

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 into the wrong crowd, make disastrous decisions, and waste their talent and ability.

Why bad things happen to good people is a nagging question, and Jesus does not answer it directly. Instead, He gathers all violence and suffering together, whether caused by natural calamity or human perversity. It makes no difference to Him. Suffering is suffering, hurt is hurt, pain is pain.

On another occasion, when Jesus was asked why people suffer, He answered, “God makes the sun shine on the good and the bad, and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust.” That’s all. Both the deserving and the undeserving get both sunshine and rain, and in a seemingly random manner.

Another person asked Him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” And Jesus answered, “Neither. There isn’t necessarily a direct correlation between sin and misfortune, between bad people and bad luck, or good people and good luck.”

Instead, according to this story in Luke’s gospel, when people questioned Jesus about life’s unfairness, He implied there was no adequate explanation for this mystery and told them instead to examine their relationship with God. He was implying that the only important question is one’s relationship with 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 loving presence makes it so. This is part of the mystery of the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross and how that event helps us deal with the mystery of our suffering. Let’s examine this mystery in two different ways.

First, even though the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross do not solve the mystery of why good people suffer, it helps us deal with our suffering because it tells us that in our deepest pain and suffering, God is there suffering along with us. God was in Jesus on the cross.

There was a customer who went into a jewelry store to buy a cross necklace. The clerk asked, “Do you want to see a plain cross, or do you want to look at one with a little man on it?”

The Protestant Christian tradition has 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 always suffers for us and with us.

The cross says that God does not stand at a distance from where we are, shouting encouragement to us, but God is involved in our pain and our hurt. Among all the historic religious traditions, only in Christianity is God depicted as suffering. This is both a surprising and incredible affirmation. God suffers with us in our suffering. God does not inflict pain and suffering on us but helps to bear the pain that is part and parcel of life.

Have you ever noticed that the loudest voices asking, “How can there be a good God, and at the same time, life be so tragic and unjust,” belong to the spectators of life’s deepest sufferings and not to the sufferers themselves? You will hardly ever find that the people who are suffering the most are those who are the biggest skeptics and nonbelievers. Indeed, the fact is that those among us who have endured the most painful suffering have also 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 experienced God’s love, presence, and power, which sustains them. They know firsthand, as the Psalmist knew, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me. Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Take a human example. What is most comforting to you? You are suffering deeply, and someone tries to bolster your spirits by speaking words of encouragement — all done with the best intentions. But then, there is another friend who comes and sits with you in your suffering — maybe speaking very few words at all.

Does not the friend who sits and suffers with you bring you a comfort far deeper than words? The good news of the Christian faith is that God is even closer in your suffering than your closest friend. God is in you. And therefore, your sufferings are also 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, leave us alone; God takes part in our pain and helps us bear the hurt of life.

The second part of the mystery of suffering is this — Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross help us in our suffering not only because we know God suffers with us, but also because 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.

To put it another way, the cross helps us in our suffering because the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross are redemptive, and our undeserved suffering can also be redemptive.

Here’s what one father wrote to his children about undeserved 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 — 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 mystery of suffering.

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 there can be victory at every cross for you.

Remember the words of St. Paul the Apostle: “I consider that 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 purposes.” Amen.