

SUFFERING ON THE JOURNEY

Mark 14:53-64

Well, we've come to the final mile-marker on our "Journey to Hope." We stand at the threshold of Holy Week that begins today with Palm/Passion Sunday. On this last Sunday before Easter, we need to remember not only the joy and jubilation of Jesus' coming to us, but also his suffering that came just days after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. And as we do, we need to know that Christ comes to us in the midst of our own hardships, tragedies and setbacks we encounter on our journey and know that in Christ Jesus, we find hope in the midst of our suffering.

Suffering. That's what I want to talk about today. But why? Why do people suffer? I wish I had a dollar for every time someone has asked me that. *"Why DO bad things happen to good people?" "Why do innocent children have to suffer?" "Why do bad people seem to live long lives, and the good die young?" "If God is so benevolent, so compassionate, and a God of love, why is there suffering in the world?"* And then, as we hear the gospel lesson today, this one: *"Why did Jesus have to suffer so?"*

I've learned in my 15 years of ministry that there just aren't any easy answers to these kinds of questions. So where do we go to find the answers, or at least find some consolation this side of heaven? What keeps us going? Who do we turn to? Where can we go? A good place to begin is Scripture.

Our text for today from Mark 14 is just one of many that show us how Jesus suffered terribly, but also how he responded. So *"What can we learn from Jesus' suffering on our "Journey to Hope" today?"*

We need to know that God's no stranger to suffering. All we need to do is turn to

the pages of scripture and find that God has compassion and love for all who suffer. When people suffer, God suffers too. If we look to the Old Testament, we remember that God heard the cries of the Hebrews in Egypt as they suffered in bondage and slavery under the heavy hand of their Egyptian taskmasters. God remembered his covenant with Abraham and was deeply moved. So, as an act of grace, God provided for them a way out. He set them free from their oppression and slavery by leading them out of bondage through the Red Sea and on to the Promised Land.

God had mercy on the Hebrews again as they cried out to God for food and water in the wilderness. Again, by God's grace, God provided water and manna from heaven.

And although they suffered 70 years of exile because of their disobedience, God again took the initiative and moved in the heart of a foreign king, King Cyrus, who allowed them to return to their homeland to rebuild the Temple and restore their life in the Promised Land.

Seeing the plight of humankind, God sent his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to deliver us from sin and death. And yes, God heard the cries of his only Son in the Garden of Gethsemane as he pleaded with God to let the cup of suffering pass from him. Remember, Jesus had been betrayed by his friends, denied by his closest friends, and suffering the injustice of a trial, the brutality of the beatings, and the humiliation of the cross. Had God abandoned Jesus? Had God turned his back on Jesus? Of course not. God was right there with him, till the end, which was really THE BEGINNING!

We could spend a month of Sundays discussing, studying and debating why people have to suffer, but don't need to. Since the fall of humankind in the Garden of Eden, pain, suffering, brokenness, trials and tribulations are all part of living in a

fallen world.

Suffering happens all around us: in the world, in our communities, and in our individual lives. We don't have to look very far or think too long about what's happening in our world these days. Suffering is all around us. Most recently we've seen the devastation of earthquakes in Haiti and Chile where 10's of thousands have perished in the rubble and destruction, not to mention the plight of the homeless and displaced in the aftermath. For the last 8 years, we've seen the horrors of war in Iraq and Afghanistan as our troops and civilians continue to die from IED's, suicide bombers, and senseless killing of every kind. A little closer to home, we see people suffering from floods, hurricanes, wildfires, and landslides. And right here in Lewes, Delaware, we've seen how sexual predators preyed upon our children, many of them living right in our neighborhoods.

Let me ask you a question: What are you going through right now? In what ways are you or have you suffered? Maybe you're struggling with an addiction or a recovering substance abuser. Maybe you're a single parent trying to make it on your own. Maybe you've lost someone near and dear to you and the pain of that loss is overwhelming. Maybe you're battling cancer or some other disease. Maybe you're so depressed you can't seem to find your way out of the dark valley you're in.

Now the question becomes, How are you coping with your hardship, your pain, your tragedy? You know, that was the focus of the sermon preparation question I emailed out to you earlier in the week: "*What keeps you going when you face hardship or tragedy?*" I must say, your responses were very encouraging. I was pleasantly surprised to hear that many of you said that you turn to the three F's: Faith, Family and Friends. Some of you said that you see your suffering as life-lessons to be learned from—lessons that have helped you grow spiritually and

emotionally. One person even shared that it was because of a particular life-tragedy that they came to Christ. Although she grew up in a loving church family, she didn't really know the depth of God's love until she went through this personal tragedy. Intellectually she knew God, but it just hadn't connected with heart until she suffered a life-tragedy, through which she cried out to the Lord and was made whole.

One of my devotional reading this week was Psalm 31. It's funny, whenever I'm feeling down, or a bit overwhelmed by the busyness of ministry, or when I go through one of my little pitty-parties, I look to God's prayer book--the Psalms. You see, the Psalms were written by people just like you and me, who went through many of the same kinds of things we do. We need to hear the hearts of those who went before us in their suffering and trials. For example, listen to the Psalmist here, many believe to be King David himself—a man after God's own heart: (see below)

I run to you, GOD; I run for dear life. Don't let me down! Take me seriously this time!

Get down on my level and listen,
and please—no procrastination!
Your granite cave a hiding place,
your high cliff aerie a place of safety.

3-5 You're my cave to hide in,
my cliff to climb.
Be my safe leader,
be my true mountain guide.
Free me from hidden traps;
I want to hide in you.
I've put my life in your hands.
You won't drop me,
you'll never let me down...

Be kind to me, God—
I'm in deep, deep trouble again.
I've cried my eyes out;

I feel hollow inside.
My life leaks away, groan by groan;
my years fade out in sighs.

14-18 Desperate, I throw myself on you:
you are my God!
Hour by hour I place my days in your hand,
safe from the hands out to get me.
Warm me, your servant, with a smile;
save me because you love me...

19-22 What a stack of blessing you have piled up
for those who worship you,
Ready and waiting for all who run to you
to escape an unkind world.
You hide them safely away
from the opposition.

23 Love GOD, all you saints;
GOD takes care of all who stay close to him,
But he pays back in full
those arrogant enough to go it alone.

24 Be brave. Be strong. Don't give up.
Expect God to get here soon.

As I read these words, I noticed something. In the midst of the pain, I could hear hope. Hope is woven throughout this cry out to God. The Psalmist may be in distress and suffering, but it's clear that he knows where his help comes from. He knows that God is with him no matter what and that God's in the driver's seat of his life.

So on this Palm Sunday, God reminds us of his promises—that no matter how dark the clouds, no matter how hopeless your situation, no matter how deep the valley, there you can find HOPE--Hope not just at the end of our journey, but all along the way, right now, in the mist of your pain, your brokenness, and your suffering. Remember, in the words of an old African American hymn, “he never said a mumblin' word” as his tormentors mocked him, spit on him, and beat him to

a pulp. Jesus persevered even though the disciples deserted him, even though they betrayed him, and denied him. Even as the nails pierced his flesh, Jesus never wavered.

I point you to the sign of the cross. You're going to see a lot of crosses this week. When you see a cross this week, be it in someone's front yard, or on a car bumper, or around someone's neck, remember: the cross is the ultimate expression of God's love for us. Yes, Jesus suffered, and died a horrible death on a cross. As God's perfect sacrificial lamb, he willingly laid down his life for his friends, for our sins, so that we could have the assurance and hope of an eternal relationship with God, here and in the hereafter. And as God's people, we can take great comfort in knowing that God not only is God with you in the midst of your suffering, God suffers with you, and cares for you. Amen.