

“Suffering in the Bible”
Romans 5:1-5
16th Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville
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The title of this morning’s sermon is “Suffering in the Bible.”

Now there are times when I submit a title to Michelle in the office, and the bulletin is printed on Tuesday, and by Wednesday or Thursday, I think to myself, I wish I had another title.

In fact, I changed the title one time, between the mailed version of the bulletin and the Sunday morning version of the bulletin. I didn’t do it this week, but I wish I had done it this week.

You see, the subject of our sermon this morning is suffering. What do Presbyterians believe about suffering?

So if I could rename this sermon today, I would title it:

“Barbies, Baptisms, Belief...and Suffering.”

Maybe I should start putting my sermon titles up for a vote. We’ll get to that later in the sermon.

If any of you saw the Barbie movie this summer, you know that the movie starts with Stereotypical Barbie living in an almost picture-perfect Barbieland. Her morning routine is effortless. She has no cellulite. She is living in an abundance of pink.

But one day during a dance at her home, she asks her friends—out of the blue, much to theirs and her astonishment—if they ever think about dying. And eventually, she travels from Barbieland to the real world, where she sees...conflict, and anguish, and gets harassed because of her gender and good looks.

And it is the awareness of this suffering that turns Barbie's world upside down. By the end of the movie, she must decide which world she wants to live in...

Now I don't mean to suggest that Presbyterians are like Barbie in Barbieland...oblivious to the suffering in the world.

That's not it at all.

But have you ever noticed how much of our Presbyterian worship is infused with suffering?

Don't take that the wrong way.

I don't mean you have to suffer through each worship service.

I mean suffering in our services is subtle...but it's there.

- In the Apostles' Creed, we confess that Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate..."
- In the prayers of intercession, we are asking God to intercede for...those who suffer.
- And at the end of the service, I offer a charge, part of which says: "...strengthen the faint-hearted, support the weak, help the suffering..."

Or consider the baptism that we just witnessed.

It's a glorious day for any family.

A beautiful sacrament.

It's about the grace of God claiming us and calling us to a new life in Jesus Christ. It's about the commitment that parents make to raise the child in the Christian faith, and the commitment WE make to model the Christian faith for that child.

Now sometimes parents are a little nervous about whether their child is going to cry during a baptism. It doesn't bother me at all when that happens. They're a little child...of course they don't understand what's going on...or do they?

I recall what one of my colleagues once said when the child he was baptizing was crying bloody murder in his arms.

The congregation was smiling, in that good-natured way that said, yes, we get it, we've been there. We understand.

And my colleague turned to the congregation, and said—you know, when a child cries during a baptism, maybe it's the child who is the ONLY one in this room who understands.

Because, he went on to say, baptism is about death to an old life, and rising to a new life.

Baptism, in other words, is about change.
Changing our way of living in the world.
And change is painful.

And that change isn't about moving to an easier way of life.
Following Christ is a difficult way of life.
It's hard because we're supposed to walk in the footsteps of Christ.
We're supposed to suffer on behalf of other people...
no wonder this child was awash in tears today.

Even in baptisms, suffering is an underlying theme...

So I'm thinking I should have changed the sermon title.
Because we've covered Barbie, and we've covered baptism...

what about belief?

More specifically, *what do we believe about God—
when it comes to suffering in our lives,
and the suffering in God's world?*

What we're tip-toeing up to here is a version of the theodicy question. What's theodicy? Theodicy comes from two words: the Greek word for God and the Greek word for justice.

If you haven't heard the word theodicy before, you've probably heard of the problem before. It usually goes like this. Three points, but you cannot reconcile them:

1. God is all loving.
2. God is all powerful.
3. Bad and terrible things happen.

You know how this works, right? If God is all loving and all powerful, then bad things shouldn't happen. But they do happen, so if God is all powerful, then God is not all loving. But God is all loving. So does that mean God is not all powerful?

Which one of these three propositions goes out the door?

Through the years, there have been numerous attempts to provide an answer to this dilemma...

For example, in his novel *The Eighth Day*, Thornton Wilder suggests that human life is like a tapestry. We often experience life from the underside of the tapestry, a mess of broken threads, tangled yarns, nothing that we would be proud to create. But there is another side, a "good" side to this tapestry...and that side is indeed beautiful and has a pattern and a discernible order.

God knows the design, because God created the tapestry, and God can see both sides. We cannot see it, but God can see it. Thorton Wilder seems to suggest that what's bad and terrible is not really so bad and so terrible.¹

If only we could see both sides...

Now I've heard plenty of Presbyterians approach suffering with the Thorton Wilder explanation in mind. It usually sounds like this: God has a plan, and we can't understand that plan, but if we just wait long enough, God will reveal the beauty of the plan, and all this suffering will make sense.

Let me say very clearly that you can be Presbyterian, and believe that God has a plan.

But I also want to be clear that it's perfectly Presbyterian of you to NOT believe that suffering is due to God's mysterious plan.

Let me get at it like this:

In the days following the terrible tsunami that struck in the Indian Ocean in 2004, a reporter spoke with a man from Sri Lanka who had lost 4 of his 5 children that day.

He was “a large man of enormous physical strength who was unable to prevent [his children] from perishing in the tsunami, and who—as he recited the names of his lost children to the reporter, in descending order of age, ending with the name of his four-year-old son—
was utterly overwhelmed by his own weeping.”

¹ As summarized in Thomas G. Long's book, *What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith*, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011.

Says the theologian David Bentley Hart of that scene:

“Only a moral cretin at that moment would have attempted to soothe his anguish by assuring him that his children had died as a result of God’s [plan]...and that...all of this was completely necessary for God to accomplish his ultimate design in having created this world.”²

I agree.

Whether it was the fires in Maui last month,
 or the earthquake in Morocco,
 or the flooding in Libya this month...
 I do not believe that the God we know in Jesus Christ
 willed, wanted, or planned any of that to happen.

So what word can Presbyterians use instead of plan?

Promise.
 God does not promise to prevent suffering.
 God DOES promise to redeem it.
 God DOES promise to walk with us through whatever suffering
 we’re going through...

In Jonathan Kozol’s book *Amazing Grace*, there’s a 12-year-old boy named Anthony.

Anthony is a street-wise kid, and he’s grown up in the Bronx:
 he’s seen drug deals, he’s seen murders.

² David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?*, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005.

His uncle Carlos has AIDS.
 Other uncles are in prison.
 But Anthony is a religious boy.

So he talks to Kozol a lot about “the kingdom of God.”
 Finally, Kozol says to him:
“What do you mean by the kingdom of God?”

“I don’t know” Anthony says.

“Why don’t you write something for me, describing the kingdom of God.”

“Like a homework assignment?”
 “Yeah, like homework.”

So Anthony writes a three page essay, part of which reads this way:

*“God’s Kingdom: God will be there.
 He will be happy we’ve arrived.
 People will come hand in hand.
 It will be bright—NOT dark and gloomy like on earth.*

“All the friendly animals will be there, but NONE of the mean ones. As for TV—forget it.

*If you want vision—you can use your eyes
 to see the people you love.*

*No one will look at you from the outside.
 People will only see you from the inside.
 All the people from the street will be there.*

Mr. Mongo will be there—but he'll be happy for once in his life.

My uncle will be there, but he will be healed.

The prophets will be there.

Adam and Eve will be there.

Edgar Allen Poe will be there, but NOT like somebody important—he'll be a writer, teaching students.

*No violence....There will be NO guns or drugs or IRS—
you won't have to pay taxes.*

You'll recognize all the children who have died when they were little...and Jesus will be good to them and play with them.

At night, Jesus will come and visit at YOUR house.”³

What I LOVE about Anthony's vision is that he knows things aren't right in this world, and he doesn't try to pin any of it on a divine plan.

Do you remember the first sermon in this sermon series, about what Presbyterians believe about the Bible?

I don't expect you to remember a sermon from 4 weeks ago.

But one of the ways to read the Bible is through the lens of God's covenant with us.

God's promise to us.

Just like Anthony did.

The first part of God's promise is that God will redeem what's broken and unjust and not right.

³ Jonathan Kozol, *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation*, New York: HarperCollins, 1995.

#2: The second part of that promise is that while we don't know HOW that redemption takes place in the future, we do know the WHO.

The who is Jesus Christ.

In the risen Christ, God promises

not only to redeem suffering one day,
but to show up in the midst of it THIS day,
in ways that we can never foresee...

I have a vivid memory of the month of January, 2007.

My wife and I were living in Bloomington, Indiana.

At the beginning of that month, with Heather 38 weeks pregnant with our first child, we learned that Heather's mother was going on hospice care. Sandy had fought breast cancer for 16 years, and the third time around, there would be no remission.

On January 16th of that month, we checked into the hospital.

On January 17th, our first child was born.

And on January 19th, while we were still in the hospital, Sandy died—in her own home, in her own bed...but some 700 miles away from the hospital in which her first grandchild had just come into the world.

I remember a colleague said to me:

“This must be such a bittersweet time for you.”

I knew what he meant.

One sad event plus one joyful event equals bittersweet.

But bittersweet was not the right word.

OVERWHELMING was the right word.

WRONG was the right word.

It was more like—this isn't fair.

This isn't right!

Why is all this happening at once??!

But something else kept happening at that time.

There were these simple acts, generous acts, that other people offered.

The church school class that Heather's father and mother were a part of in Texarkana...they all pitched in to pay for a private plane, a plane owned by one of those church members, which flew us from Indiana to Texas for the funeral, and then back again a week later, so that our newborn would not get sick from flying on a commercial airline.

When we got back to Indiana, we returned to a pile of cards THIS high from members of that church. And a meal-train had been set up for us for the next 6 weeks.

Now...what was going on there?

You could say that's just what followers of Jesus do for one another.

And it's true.

Nice people. Kind people. Generous people.

But the thing was, whenever those church members showed up at our door, I didn't just see kind and generous people. What we kept seeing at our door was nothing less than the face of Christ...

What do Presbyterians believe about suffering?

That church was a pretty good example.

And so are you.

It's the same thing I've seen happen with each of you, when you've shouldered a burden that someone else was carrying...

Years ago, the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote, "Official preaching has falsely represented ...Christianity, as nothing but consolation..."

And consequently doubt has the advantage...

If Christianity were truthfully presented as suffering,
 ever greater as one advances further in it:
 doubt would [be] disarmed..."⁴

Now, I said at the beginning of the sermon—
 something about changing the sermon title,
 and putting the new title before y'all for a vote.

The original title: "Suffering in the Bible"...how many of you vote for that?

Good. I'm ready to change it.

The next suggestion...do you remember?
 "Barbies, Baptisms, Belief...and Suffering"

Not bad.
 But I've got a third suggestion.

My third suggestion for a sermon title is this:
 "Was Kierkegaard Correct?"

⁴ From *The Journals of Soren Kierkegaard*, cited in "Pastors Who Won't Be Preachers: A Polemic Against Homiletical Accomodation to the Culture of Contentment," by William H. Willimon, in *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost, 2006.

If Christianity was presented as suffering—
ever greater as one advances further in it—
doubt would be disarmed...

Did Kierkegaard have it right?

You know, instead of voting in here, vote out there.
Vote with how you share the love of God made known in Jesus
Christ...

Amen.