

Sermon Preached April 10, 2009
Good Friday
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
North Andover, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Wilson

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Have you ever suffered? Have you ever felt lost and hopeless? Painful feelings which seem not to end? Of course you have. To be human is to suffer. There is no getting around it. We all have those times. The older I get, the more compassionate I find myself to be, because no matter how much I may disagree with or dislike someone, I now realize that they too have suffered and known deep pain. It draws us closer together.

Sometimes suffering is thrust upon us, like the death of a loved one. Sometimes we ourselves have caused our suffering through our poor choices. Or others have caused our suffering through their choices. Sometimes the pain is physical. Sometimes emotional, or spiritual, or psychological. Sometimes it is so awful that we would do anything to make it go away. Life becomes a struggle.

All of today's readings talk a lot about suffering. The suffering servant of Isaiah, the suffering of the writer of the psalm, the suffering of Jesus. Scripture includes many references to this very human situation because the Bible is about the human condition.

Jesus' passion and death are the culmination of a story which began 1,500 years earlier in Egypt. It was then the ancient Israelites were held captive by Pharaoh and the Egyptians. They suffered under the yoke of slavery. Forced to perform demanding physical labor with insufficient food, no freedom, and in constant fear for their lives, the ancient Israelites called to God to help. They were suffering. God sent Moses who, as you know, sent 10 plagues to Egypt in order to soften Pharaoh's heart. The tenth plague was the worst. It caused the firstborn in every family to die. But so that it wouldn't kill the Israelites, God told them to sacrifice an unblemished lamb and to smear the blood on the doorways of their homes. This would cause the plague to "pass over." The Passover lamb saved the Israelites from the plague, ultimately allowed them to be freed from slavery to Pharaoh. They were released from their suffering and later entered the Promised Land.

Now fast forward 1,500 years. Jesus has been engaged in his ministry for three years and has just entered Jerusalem, the seat of Roman power. The Romans, like the Egyptians before them, are holding the Jews in a sort of slavery. The power of Caesar and the Roman Empire have conquered the land and its people. The Jews have little power in their own country. Periodically people have risen up to confront the injustices and abuses of power of Rome, but these people usually end up nailed to a cross. The cross was the Roman form of execution for those who were enemies of the state. The Jewish people suffered. As you heard the men's group explain on Palm Sunday, Jesus' actions during the week he was in Jerusalem were politically provocative. He was critical of Rome and the Jewish leadership which supported Rome. He spoke truth to power, uncovering the lies and injustices of the system. Every night that week Jesus slept outside the city for safety. Tensions rose throughout the week, culminating in the gospel story we just read. Jesus was crucified as an enemy of the state.

In the gospel of John, the Last Supper is the day BEFORE the Passover meal. And in Jewish tradition, the Passover lamb is always sacrificed on the day of the Passover. The Priests in the Temple was very busy slaughtering lambs all day as quickly as they could so the people could eat them that night at the Passover Seder. So in the gospel of John, Jesus is crucified, is sacrificed, on the same day, at exactly the same time, as the Passover Lambs. John is trying to make the point as strongly as possible that Jesus is the Passover Lamb. His death, sacrifice, and blood are the means of death passing over us, and our salvation from slavery. There is a direct correlation between the sacrificed Passover lamb and the crucifixion of Jesus. Both are sacrifices. Both involve blood as a means of salvation. Both provide release from slavery and suffering. Both result in the eating of the sacrifice in a ritual meal by which to remember the event. We cannot understand the crucifixion without understanding the Passover.

So what does this have to do with our suffering? Most suffering is caused by sin. And by sin, I don't mean you are a bad person. Some people have an unhelpful definition of sin. In actuality, sin is whatever causes alienation from God, others, ourselves, and the creation.

If we harm someone, we cause alienation. For instance, ridiculing someone or some group of people is a sin. We are separating ourselves from them. Polluting God's earth is a sin. We think we are separate from the creation. Whenever by our actions, or those of the system to which we belong, some person or part of God's universe is harmed, we are tearing the fabric of creation. Racism, sexism, ageism, greed, pride, murder, adultery, lying, stealing, and so on, are sins not because they are arbitrary rules, but because by engaging in them we hurt ourselves and others. They cause suffering. In turn our relationship with God is damaged. We are harming what God loves. Sins can be done by one person or by a group. They can be individual or corporate.

When multi-billion dollar executives want to give bonuses at the expense of the less-affluent, that is a sin. It causes suffering. When a chemical company thinks it's okay to dump their toxic waste in a river which in turn causes cancer in the children of a town 50 miles downstream, that is a sin. When I am frazzled with my kids one morning because we are running late and I start yelling at them in a mean way, causing Emma to cry because I hurt her feelings, that is a sin. This doesn't mean the executives or chemical company workers or I are necessarily bad people, but we all make some stupid choices in life. We do things which distance us from the Kingdom that God has planned for us.

So, we've got Jesus coming before the Jews who are suffering at the hands of the sinful policies of Rome. And we've got Jesus coming to us who are suffering the sins of our world. And Jesus says, "I want to help you overcome your alienation from God. I want to mend your relationship with God, with the creation, and with each other. This is called atonement. It is reconciliation. Your sins cause suffering, yours and others. I am going to take on your sins, so you can be made clean before God. So you can be released from your suffering. Repent and believe in the Kingdom God has planned for you. Sin no more, but I'll help you clean up your current mess. You are a beloved child of God and you won't be left stranded." So then Jesus confronts the sin of Rome and consequently dies on a cross.

But he turns the whole system on its head! Because his crucifixion, instead of being the end of the story, thrusts his message forward even faster. He is the sacrifice. The Passover Lamb that is slain so that we may live. Our sins die with him. And he takes our suffering on himself. God uses Rome's sin to fulfill God's purposes, namely that God, through Christ, takes our sin and suffering on himself, and death will pass us by.

This does not mean that sin and suffering are fully gone from our world – yet. Jesus’ death was the first step towards the fulfillment of the Kingdom, when sin, suffering and death will be no more. We are out from under Pharaoh’s yoke, but we haven’t yet reached the Promised Land. In the meantime, God knows what it means to endure unspeakable suffering. And when we suffer, because of sin, or death, or things outside anyone’s control, God in Christ is with us. As the reading from Hebrews says, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses.” Jesus knows what it is to suffer. When we are in deep pain, Jesus can hold us in his arms, comfort us, love us, and say, “Go ahead. Cry. I’ve been there.”

Amen.