

THE SON OF MAN MUST SUFFER

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: I Corinthians 1:18-25,

Mark 8:31-38

None of us wants anyone we love to suffer. It is among the hardest things in life to see someone who is as life itself to you, go through pain or suffering. This is no more so than in the anguish a parent feels for a child.

Recently I visited with a family from out of town who are in the city for special surgery. The son in the family is waiting for a liver transplant. He has been waiting 93 days (in fact) for that hope to be fulfilled, and in that time he has fought his way through infections, disappointments, jaundice, loss of appetite, diarrhea, vomiting, painful worrisome days in the ICU, and interminable nerve-wracking waiting. If ever a twenty year old has suffered, it is this young man. His yellow skin and distended belly unmistakable signs of the failing of his weakened body.

And if *his* suffering is great, let me assure you that the suffering of his mother and dad on his behalf is exquisite. They have kept watch with him through many a fearful day, cooled his brow with a wet washcloth on feverish nights, sat by his bedside and watched each measured drip of antibiotic dropping from the plastic bag into the tube that leads downward to his vein, and held his hand through the darkness when the nightmares came. They have waited through each disappointing day with hope that knows no end. Both of them would willingly trade places with their son, if it would bring him health. But they cannot and it won't.

We suffer for those who suffer, and especially for those we love who do so.

I suppose that is why Peter is so reluctant to let Jesus talk about his inevitable suffering. "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering," Jesus said, "and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed."

And Peter immediately jumps into the middle of the situation denying that Jesus must do any such thing. Mark tells us that Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked him.

It was a natural reaction. I don't blame Peter for it. I think I might have done the same thing if I had been there. "Oh no, Jesus, everybody loves you. You're not going to suffer. You are the Messiah. Goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life. Bad things don't happen to good people."

It's a natural reaction. Someone in the last stages of cancer gets serious on us and says, "I think I'm going to die." And our reaction is to say, "Oh no, you're going to be all right. You look just fine."

And of course, all we have proven by saying that is that we are not ready to think about life without that other person, and surely unprepared to talk about it.

In seminary, one of the things you learn, if you are lucky, is that when someone says to you that they are dying, you don't respond by saying, "No you aren't." You say something like, "That must be hard to think about." or, "every day must seem very

precious now.” You invite the next higher level of truth. And then listen for what comes next.

When Jesus said, “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering,” Peter said, “No; you’re going to be all right. You look great!” Mostly because Peter was not ready to go there with Jesus.

Peter says this after a momentary high when Jesus had asked the disciples what people were saying about him. “Who do people say that I am?” he asked.

And the disciples reported that there were all kinds of things being said on the street. The buzz was that Jesus might be John the Baptist reincarnate, or Elijah, or one of the prophets come back from the dead.” That was the word on Jesus.

“But who do you say that I am?” Jesus asked. A question that begs a deeper reckoning. “You are the Messiah,” Peter told Jesus. “You are Mesiach, the anointed one, King David’s successor, the worthy descendant we have been waiting for all these centuries to come and restore David’s kingdom in Israel.”

And of course, Peter was right, and Peter was wrong all at the same time. Jesus was the long awaited Messiah indeed, but not a victorious, triumphant, powerful, ruler like David, known for his military prowess and durable ego, but a suffering servant, a completely *other* model of spiritual authority.

No wonder when Jesus began to speak of suffering, Peter’s eyes glazed over, his mind froze, and he realized that while Jesus was saying words he understood, they were from a stock of phrases that did not compute. The words *suffering* and *messiah* could not go in the same sentence together.

So Peter rebuked Jesus, took him aside and straightened him out. And Jesus, looking at all the disciples, realizing that he had to make his point precisely at this moment, said to Peter and to all of them, “Get behind me, and do not stand in the way, because you are thinking about yourselves and what you want, and not about what God wants.”

It was true of course. None of them wanted Jesus to come to any harm. I doubt even Judas intended Jesus any ill at that moment. But Jesus had to do something to shake them up, to get their attention, and make them realize that if there was to be any suffering it should not come as a surprise either to them or to him. He also wanted them to know that his suffering was not a sign of God’s having abandoned him. Jesus was implicitly offering his profession of faith to the Twelve that regardless of what happened to him, God would vindicate him.

This would be important for the disciples to remember later, when the suffering was finished.

The scholars differ as to how much they believe Jesus understood his own inevitable death at the hands of the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes. Some suggest that there is a lot of post-resurrection editorializing going on in this passage; revisionist writing to reflect a prescient knowledge on Jesus’ part that says more than he really knew at this stage of his public ministry. We do know that knowledge of the circumstances of one’s own death was a sign of wisdom, a supernatural gift given to

extraordinary persons in the Greco-Roman world. So maybe Mark is writing for audiences influenced by such wisdom and giftedness.

But even if he were, there is no denying that Jesus must have realized that he was in grave danger in Jerusalem, that preaching the same gospel that he had preached in Galilee, confronting the scribes and Pharisees and rulers of the law as he did was not a neutral thing to do. For us to imagine that he might confront the embodiment of power and not incur the wrath of power is to imagine a figure so naive as to be inconceivable.

At some level, Jesus is clear that going to Jerusalem will cost him dearly. And it will cost his friends as well, even if they do not fully understand at this point how much it will cost them.

Like Peter, we still have trouble with a Savior who suffers. Power, wealth, influence, fame are what we understand. The ability to suffer well is not a quality we admire in a leader, religious or otherwise. And yet all the religions on earth deal in one way or another with the great questions of the meaning of life and of death and of human suffering, what it means and where it leads.

For us who are followers of Jesus Christ, we know that great purposes in life sometimes exact great suffering, and this is not easy to accept in a pain-killing society. We dull our senses to the pain of life with prescriptions to ease the hurt of the trick knee and the aching back and the hip out of joint.

We numb ourselves with alcohol and crystal meth, cocaine and heroin, cigarettes and tranquilizers, uppers and downers to make it through the day. Our Buddhist friends remind us that the first noble truth that there is suffering in life, but in response most of us try to mask it as much as possible. None of us likes suffering, not for ourselves and not for those we love.

Yet pain is a part of what it is to live, even if at times our pain is severe, our suffering exhausting. We may not welcome it, but we had best get used to it because suffering is a part of the package deal that life is.

I wish there was some easier way to live life; some way to pass a lifetime that wouldn't break your heart. But there is not. We all must bear some pain, some sadness, some suffering in life. And the truth is that in the end suffering is a part of what makes life dear. It teaches us lessons nothing else in life can. It opens the heart to a level of feeling that the mind alone cannot know.

The question, then, is not whether we can avoid suffering; the question is what we will make of the suffering we know in life. Will we rail at the unfairness of it all? Rage at the coming of the night? Or live more aware of the precious nature of life, recognizing that its sufferings are part of what makes it so significant? It's limits, so dear?

Two weeks ago Saturday, part of our group traveling in Israel decided to venture into the Palestinian controlled territory of Bethlehem. That group visited with the director of the Wi'am Palestinian Conflict Resolution Center, Zoughbi Zoughbi, and with Sheikh Maher A'ssoff a Muslim community leader in Bethlehem.

But it was the group's meeting with George Sa'adeh that left the most enduring impression of the trip on them. Sa'adeh is the Deputy Mayor of Bethlehem, a graduate

of the University of Southern California, a 40-year-old Christian who is principal of the Greek Orthodox High School in Beit Sahour, a school hard hit by the unemployment and poverty that now stalks Bethlehem.

On March 25th, three years ago, George and his wife and two daughters then 12 and 10 were driving in the city and stopped in front of the Shepherd Hotel. The family had just pulled around a corner when Israeli soldiers opened fire on their car with hundreds of rounds of bullets. Everyone in the car was hit several times. George himself took nine rounds to his body.

He later learned that the soldiers had set up an ambush for three known terrorists who were driving a car resembling George's family's car. The terrorists' car was the next to come around the corner and it too was attacked and its occupants killed.

Even though the soldiers rushed George, his wife and two girls to the hospital, his beautiful 10-year-old daughter, Christine, died of gunshot wounds to the head. George was still in the hospital recovering the day of his daughter's funeral.

Three months after the accident, George Sa'adeh received a call from an Israeli woman he did not know. She represented a group of bereaved parents, The Parents' Circle, composed of both Palestinian and Israeli parents who had lost children to the hostilities. The Israeli woman invited him, a Palestinian Christian, to join with other bereaved parents in working for peace.

Asked if he didn't hate the soldiers who shot his daughter, and his family, George answered that what happened was an accident and that God had given him the power to forgive. "We get on with our life," he said in an interview with BBC at the time, "but it's not easy. We are all human beings - Jewish, Christian and Muslim. Losing a child is the same pain for all of us."¹ And I would add that in Jesus Christ, even God has known that pain.

After this recent visit to Israel, I am not sure how peace will come in the Middle East, and especially in the areas of Gaza and the West Bank, or on either side of the security barrier that now separates Israelis from Palestinians. There has been so much suffering there. But however peace comes, when it comes, and someday it will come, I suspect it will come in something of the way it has come to George Sa'adeh. As God teaches us how to transform our suffering into forgiveness, our brokenness into healing, our pain into promise.

The Christian witness in this world is not to render evil for evil, nor to avoid pain at all costs, nor to turn away from those who suffer, but to do as our Lord did, to enter into the suffering of the world and to own it as an inevitable part of living, a part we must endure, but not alone, for in Jesus Christ, God has taken on our suffering too, and we are not alone.

"The Son of Man must endure great suffering," Jesus told his disciples. And thank goodness, no thank God, he did. For in him God is present in every experience of life, even in death itself, transforming what seems hopeless into hope, what seems as death into life.

That's the point that Peter missed. The good news of the gospel, that in life and in death we belong to God; and nothing can separate us from that love in that love

If you think about it, that's enough to get you through just about anything, just about everything. Especially if you think about it.

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¹ BBC Online news, December 22, 2005.