

Today we are going to explore the relationship between suffering and redemption but we need to start with our psalm. One of my commentaries referred to this as the soldiers' psalm. Apparently during World War I soldiers would write out the psalm and carry it with them like a talisman for protection. In a summarized form it says that if you trust in God nothing bad will ever happen. You will be protected from danger even if you walk among lions and snakes; moreover God will save you and give you long life.

Sounds great, doesn't it?

Now think about your life. Does anyone feel like they have been duped? Most of us can talk about bad things that have happened, whether by accident, through illness, or even ill will. How protected were we really? And if so, does that mean that we haven't made the Lord our refuge or that God has somehow failed us?

Well no, not exactly.

I can't explain why bad things happen, a young man has a stroke, 20 young people are killed in a car accident, people lose their homes to pay for medical expenses, all you have to do is look at the news and the tragedy of life is spread before our eyes. We try to rationalize in order to make sense of what we see and hear and experience by saying: Things happen for a reason which means that somehow those affected by tragedy are supposed to learn something from the experience.

I have said it before, but "things don't happen for a reason", that's pernicious rubbish. If you believe that is true then please explain to me what benefit there could be to the deaths and losses caused by hurricanes, or tornadoes, or forest fires or random acts of violence, or genocide, or mass starvation? This does not mean that people cannot transform suffering but it is not a given. Sometimes we can find causation for suffering if we look hard enough but causation does not explain purpose, or provide the reason why people have to suffer, or die in untimely, and unpredictable ways, why they have to endure persecution, rejection, and so forth.

No, there is no higher reason for suffering but that does not mean that suffering can't be redemptive, that we can't learn and grow and achieve something through suffering.

That's the ultimate paradox of our salvation in Jesus Christ.

Look at the gospel lesson it lays the paradox right out before us. Just a few weeks ago we heard the disciples arguing about who was the greatest among them. Now we have James and John trying to reserve places of honor on Jesus' right and left. What's more they don't even ask outright, they ask Jesus to do whatever they want. You would almost think that Jesus had been a parent because he doesn't fall for their trap. He makes them spit it out. Nor does he chastise them for their request, just as he did not chastise the disciples for wanting to be the greatest. Instead he cautions them that honor will come at great cost and it will not be defined as the world defines it.

- First, greatness requires sacrifice of self, to become a slave to all;
- Second, Jesus himself came to serve and not to rule;
- Third he came to give his life as a ransom to redeem us from the slavery of sin.

These men who loved Jesus, who followed Jesus, who believed in Jesus, still didn't quite get the reversal that would be required to bring about the kingdom of God.

It's hard to grasp even 2,000 years later. Perhaps it's even hard for us since most of us are well beyond subsistence living. Our struggle for survival is a little higher up Maslow's hierarchy of needs than most first century Palestinian peasants.

Maslow presented a pyramid-shaped hierarchy of needs. At the bottom are physiological needs: food, water, warmth, rest. Next come safety needs which given what we know about Jesus and his followers was probably in the back of their minds. Once these basic needs are met then according to Maslow we start worrying about our psychological needs and at the top is our need for self-fulfillment.

Jesus was calling on his disciples to expect and almost embrace suffering, but not suffering for its own sake as witnesses to the relationship he was offering with God. That is suffering with a purpose which can prepare people to endure more easily than suffering for no apparent reason.

At the same time, those often random events that cause us pain and suffering can also give us an opportunity to reevaluate our lives and our purpose. We could call these little reversals, meaning those times when we are able to reframe suffering into an opportunity for growth ... although most often they don't require the dramatic self-offering of our Lord or even the Suffering Servant in our reading from Isaiah. Primarily because our suffering tends to be confined to our personal lives, not the fate of a people or the salvation of humankind.

Actually I think this passage from Isaiah sums up what Jesus is trying to tell his disciples. The Suffering Servant was "stricken, struck down by God and afflicted".

Shades of Job who had done nothing wrong but was cursed with losing his wealth and his family and even his health. When he proclaimed his innocence in the face of all of his losses he was told by his friends that he must have done something wrong or he would not be suffering.

Nice friends, but aren't we all guilty of the same sort of assumptions that people are inevitably responsible for their own suffering He had cancer – was he a smoker? She was assaulted so she must have been wearing provocative clothing. You know the drill. But no, the Suffering Servant carried "the iniquity of us all".

Let that sink in for a moment because that is just what Jesus is telling his disciples is going to happen to him. How many of us would be willing to suffer in order to make many righteous? But the Suffering Servant is not suffering in vain. God did not permit his indignities out of carelessness or casual disregard for human suffering. The Suffering Servant is an example to the nations and as such God has promised his vindication. I think this is the refuge that I described in our psalm, "Out of his anguish he shall find light;" The Suffering Servant was held to have a purpose for his suffering. A supreme sacrifice in order to make "intercession for our transgressions."

Unfortunately the Suffering Servant could not transform our sin. It was the Church Father Athanasius who said "That which is not assumed is not redeemed." by which he meant that it

would take God becoming human and living through the challenges of being human to transform and redeem our sin. The proof of Christ's success is the resurrection.

We see the triumph of sacrificial suffering in our reading from Hebrews. Although he was a Son he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him,"

Christ shared our vulnerabilities, our weaknesses, and endured humiliation, torture and crucifixion on our behalf.

While I don't imagine any of us are going to be called to redeem humankind through our suffering, with faith we can endure what suffering does come our way. Admittedly not all suffering can be redeemed; some are destroyed by it and we can hope and pray that when Christ' comes again all will be made well. But by God's grace there are times when we can find ways to make meaning from what has happened to find ways to live with and through and around the cause of our suffering and that is when God shows up. That is when God becomes our refuge that no matter what bad things happen, the lions that claw and the snakes that bite, we can find transformation and redemption in what has happened because we know that God is with us and is our salvation.

Amen