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3rd Sunday in Lent Sermon

Oh Lord, may only your Word be offered and your Word received. Amen.

Friends, today I want to talk about suffering. I know members of this congregation are suffering. Some of us in very acute and personal ways. Maybe you're worrying about how you'll meet your needs and the needs of your family. Maybe you or a loved one is struggling with illness and physical pain. Maybe you've lost a loved one recently. Maybe you're in conflict with a family member or working through the end of a relationship. Maybe you're thinking about the next several weeks and wondering how on Earth you're going to be able to say goodbye to your beloved church leaders.

And some of us may be suffering in more general "look at the state of the world" ways. You may be worried about war and grieving the lives lost this week. You may fear the division in this country and the way that the possibility of reconciliation seems more and more unlikely. Suffering is all around us.

This is a challenging thing to talk about. It's a hard and sad reality. And for some of us, it may not be what you wanted to hear about at church. But suffering is here in our Scripture for today. So, what does the Apostle Paul have to say about suffering?

In his letter to the Romans he writes, "we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope."

That sounds kind of nice, doesn't it? Endurance, character... Some translations use the word perseverance. We might now even say grit.

We might take away from this portion of Scripture that suffering is somehow good. Some even say based on this passage and others that human suffering is God's will. To that I say, it's not so simple.

I actually don't think suffering is inherently good. I believe there is no virtue in suffering on its own. And it would be wrong to read this passage and use it to say that the suffering of marginalized people, oppressed people, or abused people is somehow good for them. And unfortunately, that is exactly how some have interpreted this verse. People have told others that they shouldn't try to get out a bad situation because their suffering is actually making them somehow better.

And this idea shows up in other parts of our culture. Think about the phrase, "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger." While some trials do help us grow, this statement ignores the reality that hardship, trauma, and prolonged stress actually tend to weaken our bodies and minds, not strengthen them.

So, if I'm saying that suffering actually isn't good, what should we do about it? One approach would be to try to minimize as much suffering in your life as possible.

When I was a kid, I had a purple CD player and one of my favorite CDs was the album *Sounds of Silence* by Simon and Garfunkel, which ends with the song "I am a Rock."

Do you know it? *I am a rock. I am an island.*

In this song the narrator describes being alone, surrounded by the walls that he's built to keep himself emotionally safe.

What kinds of walls have we built in an effort to keep ourselves emotionally safe and free from suffering? Maybe we turn off the news. Maybe we drop a friend who has too many problems. Maybe we say that that person or group of people deserve what's happening to them.

The song continues:

If I never loved, I never would have cried. I am a rock. I am island.

Maybe the narrator meant this in a romantic sense, but I'm going to say yes, and take it even farther. You cannot love in any sense without experiencing suffering.

Living in a contained bubble that removes you from the common person is a way to prevent suffering. It's just not the gospel.

So what am I saying here? Is suffering good or bad? Should we or shouldn't we suffer?

Let's take a closer look at the context of this passage in Romans. Paul is writing to a community of Christians in Rome over 200 years before Christianity will become the state religion of the Roman Empire. We don't know exactly what was happening to the Christians in Rome at this time, but we do know that Christians in Rome will be intensely persecuted under Nero in 60s. So, when Paul is saying, "we boast in our sufferings" he may be referring to the difficulties this community is facing. He may also be referring to the suffering that he himself has faced. Paul likely wrote this letter towards the end of his life. He'd been imprisoned, whipped, stoned. His position in Roman society was one of shame along with enslaved people and criminals. When Paul is speaking of suffering, it's personal. He's not sitting above anyone and looking down to say that suffering is good. He's speaking to himself as much as he's speaking to the Christians in Rome.

And in classic Paul fashion, he connects this consideration of suffering to Christ crucified on the cross. For Paul, the crucifixion of Jesus and the resurrection are not two separate unrelated events. They go hand in hand as the way that God reconciled all of humanity, even in our profound brokenness, to God.

“But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”

We live in an imperfect world. A world that includes the powers of sin, evil, and death. And while some people are more insulated from suffering than others through their wealth, health, whatever privileges they have, decisions they might make, suffering is unavoidable. We're all subject to suffering both natural and humanmade.

Yet, the call of the Gospel is not to hide from the world, but to look at the cross and on it to see Christ, who is God incarnate. God showed his love to us through entering into our suffering, through coming close enough to us to get hurt.

I'm not saying you should suffer, I'm saying that, with Christ as your model, you will.

There is suffering that is born out of evil, injustice, and negligence. This is suffering we should do everything in our power to end. But there is also suffering that is born out of love. This is the kind of suffering that is unavoidable on this side of the Resurrection.

So, what are we supposed to do with our suffering?

See it, feel it. Follow it down to its roots. Come even closer.

If you are suffering out of care for another, you might be able to say to yourself: thank God that this still hurts, thank God that I'm not numb, thank God that I still care so deeply.

If you are suffering yourself, share it. You do not suffer alone. Christ is already suffering with you and sharing your burdens with others gives them an opportunity to live into the Christian call to love and serve each other.

And then what? Cry out to God. The Israelites in our Old Testament reading today quarrel with Moses about needing water, then Moses cries to God, “What shall I do with this people?” And God provides. Following God’s instructions, Moses strikes the rock at Horeb, and water pours out of it.

Listen to God when God speaks to you. The Samaritan woman at the well initially pushes back against Jesus saying, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” But she sticks around and engages with Jesus then walks away with profound faith that she has met the Messiah. She then goes on to share this revelation with her community. The Gospel tells us, “Many Samaritans from that city believed in Jesus because of the woman’s testimony.”

Our call is not to sit in suffering and be miserable. Our misery does not glorify God. But in our fallen world, pain tells us that something is wrong. It prompts us to act.

I cannot tell you exactly what to do in the face of everything that is in front of us. Each of us has to discern our own specific call. My one suggestion is that no matter what you decide to do, be fueled by love and hope, not hatred and vengeance.

In this world of suffering, may you be driven by love of God and love of neighbor. May you thrive in the hope of God’s promise of communal restoration, reconciliation, and salvation. May you find peace and comfort in God’s eternal loving embrace.

Amen.