

Third Sunday in Lent

March 24, 2019

By: The Rev. Linda J. Ferguson

Exodus 3: 1-15

Psalm 63: 1-8

1 Corinthians: 10: 1-13

Luke 13: 1-9

Grace and Peace to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus who is the Christ. Amen

During an evening Lenten service at a parish in Massillon, Ohio, the Pastor, the late Pastor Mourice "Mo" White, shares this revelation:

“During one Lenten season, one of the older, but faithful members of our church came with her husband to an evening Lenten service. As they were leaving the service, the woman somehow fell down the outside flight of steps and broke her hip. For some unknown cause, she did not recover from the hip surgery and died in a few short days.

As I stood with the bereaved husband by the casket the night before the funeral, many came to offer their sympathies. Some were saying to the grieving husband: "God must of had a plan for this, so accept it." Another said, "It was God's will and we must live with it." Still another said, "Somehow God planned this to test your faith!!" And still another said, "There is a silver lining in every cloud, you will find God's reason behind this eventually."

I left that funeral home filled with a very strong emotion of anger at the "babbling", I heard that evening. So, I went to my study and rewrote the beginning of the sermon for the funeral.

The next day, during the funeral service, I began the sermon with this phrase: ***"My God does not push old ladies down church steps!!!"*** I then began to explain that God cannot be blamed or accused for all the brokenness of this world. If God is the author of death, how can He be at the same time the author of life as shown through the resurrection we celebrate each Sunday and especially on Easter? Is God the God of the living, or the God of the dead? You cannot have it both ways.

Jesus was asked the question in our gospel lesson this morning: **“Why did God let this happen”?**

Why did God allow the tower at Siloam to fall on 18 men? Why?

Why were they more of a sinner than anyone else?

Why does suffering happen in this world is an age old question. Why sickness, why storms, why accidents? Why?

I know that each of us have asked that same question. It was not long ago that I had the same questions when circumstances in my life had become overwhelming, when everything was crumbling, and my world was falling apart. Why God did you let this happen?

When we ask "why?" our thoughts tend to go in a negative place; of blame guilt, and anger.

I have found that it's better to ask "What? How? Who?"

What is God going to do to bring us to a place of healing?

How are we going to grow through these experiences of grief, sorrow, loneliness?

Who is God going to send into our life to walk with us in these times of trial?

Those questions open our eyes so they can see how God blesses us even in our suffering and pain.

(Pause)

I would like to share with you an answer to that same question in a blog written by Bob Perks to a friend that wrote to him upon a tragedy in her life. In her question she asked: "If there is a God, why would He permit this to happen?"

Here is Bob Perk's response: Until recently I struggled to have an answer that I was comfortable with, myself. Yet, at least once a week someone writes to ask me that.

I am not a preacher nor a student of Bible studies. I cannot throw a Bible passage at every circumstance in life. But I have arrived at a point where I feel comfortable with an answer to this question. I could easily say, "I don't know."

For a while I used the old, "God works in mysterious ways," answer. It seemed to be a good enough, one size fits all reply to a million unexplainable events in life.

But through the course of the past four plus years I've been writing this message, I've come to my own conclusion. Is it biblically correct? Will it fit every faith represented here? I just don't know.

But when I replied to one of my readers yesterday, it tied into a story line I was about to write and the result was...I felt very comfortable with saying it.

You must know by now that a single word, a phrase, or a look can catch my attention and sparks fly in the creative part of my being. It happened again on Sunday. I was watching a movie and one character asked, "**Where's the river if it doesn't rain?**"

I immediately grabbed my pen and pad to write it down.

Here's what I heard: "**If it weren't for the rain we wouldn't have rivers that take us somewhere else.**"

All the rain in our lives, all the dark cloudy rainy days that wash away our dreams serve a greater purpose.

Our pain, our loss should take us somewhere else. The experience adds to our lives and moves us in a direction further along life's pathway. Sometimes to a better place than those who have not suffered in life.

Then I read a message from one of my friends.

She was struggling with her reality of God in her life. Unlike before, I didn't hesitate to reply to her. I didn't have to think about my answer. For without a doubt I am completely comfortable with it.

Perhaps today you find yourself in a doubting place because frankly, your life has hit bottom and you are wondering, "Why does God permit this?"

Here is my reply:

Dear Friend,

From the deepest part of my soul I hold my heart out to you, but right now, with the mindset that you are in, there is nothing I can say that you will agree with.

You know me from my writing. You know what I will tell you without even asking...but perhaps that is why you wrote to me today.

I can only tell you there is a God.

He's the same God you loved when things were good in your life. The same God you prayed to when your needs were not as great. Perhaps an illness, a worry, a concern were on your prayer list during other times. You never hesitated to ask His help then, because you trusted Him.

He is the same God your parents were grateful to when you were born and I rejoice in when I call you "friend."

The same God you might have thanked a thousand times and never even realized it.

Yes, He permitted this tragedy. Just as He permits every other horrific thing in this world.

Through many years of life I've learned much, suffered some and painfully ached for the world around me. Through all of this I have come to this conclusion. This all comes, I believe, when He permitted us to have "choice." He doesn't force us to believe in Him. He even permits you to write to me denying Him. What He does offer in place of all of this is His love and eternity with those we love who have gone before us.

Now, my friend. I know you didn't write to me hoping that I would agree with you. You wrote to me hoping I'd tell you that you are in pain and mourning and even God will forgive you for doubting Him. But the greatest gift you can now give in return is to stand tall in the face of all this and serve as an example to friends and family, young and old, who are watching you. They are all looking for someone to lead them through this. If no one does then the loss is even greater, for everyone will die in spirit.

Mourn, my friend. Cry and pound your chest for your loss. God cries with you and lovingly waits for you to turn to Him once again.

(Pause)

And, so, where's the river if it doesn't rain?"

Luke makes two valid points that are seen in our gospel lesson this morning.

One, God does not will suffering. He allows it to happen in this less than perfect world. Jesus even talks about accidents when He brings up the subject of the tower of Siloam. Jesus admits there are accidents, suffering in this world. Two situations were brought up, one was concerning the death of some Galileans by Pilate because of their supposed insurrection and the other situation about a tower of Siloam that fell and killed 18 people. Jesus asks a rhetorical question, asking "Are these people worse sinners because they suffered more, and each time he answers no.

Suffering does not come because people are bad or sinful. Suffering is part of this world. Suffering does not come from an angry God, God is not the angry Judge, judging each deed then giving out the punishment of sickness, death and tragedy as he sees fit. This is not the correct view of God as we see him in scripture, but sadly, many people have this kind of theology. Everything that happens, everything good or bad comes from God.

God cries with us as we suffer. As Jesus hurt on the cross, he understands our suffering. He experienced our suffering on the cross so he can walk along with us as we suffer. And Jesus, in our gospel lesson, tells us this parable about God waiting patiently for us. In our suffering, Jesus is with us and wants to redeem us. He wants us to believe in Him. We are to remain in faith even in the face of suffering. In a time of suffering it is not the time to turn from God, but just the opposite, we must turn to Him.

In Exodus, we heard the story of a God who is fully engaged with the plight of the oppressed, a God who is moved by their cries, and a God who responds with action. This is the God we see throughout Scripture, especially in the work of the Hebrew prophets and the ministry of Jesus.

We also heard Paul tell the church of Corinth “We all experience times of testing, which is normal for every human being. But God will be faithful to you. He will screen and filter the severity, nature, and timing of every test or trial you face so that you can bear it. And each test is an opportunity to trust him more, for along with every trial God has provided for you a way of escape that will bring you out of it victoriously!”

As we examine our faith during this season of Lent, I think it’s important for us to realize that one of the requirements for developing a heart of trust is the realization that we need God in all of our lives. We cannot look to other people, or even to ourselves to provide what we need in this life. When we’ve done our best, sometimes life still sends us failure and loss. And other people may have good intentions, but if we look to them instead of God, we’re only setting ourselves up for disappointment. Only God can truly provide what we need in our lives. That is the most fundamental reason for making the decision to seek God honestly, with all our heart, every day, sometimes every hour, and sometimes moment by moment. We seek God as the Psalmist did, thirsting for him constantly, because we know that our very life depends on him.

In times when life becomes unmanageable, we, as the Body of Christ, need to be willing to walk alongside one another. When we do this, we put flesh and bone on the person of Jesus. We can be with one another in the midst of suffering, helping each other carry the weight. When we are willing to sit in the pain, to walk with one another when life’s path is difficult, and to shoulder one another’s burdens when they are too heavy, we become living proof that while life can sometimes be too much, through the goodness of our loving God displayed within us, we can move forward together.

So, for today, let us remember, **"If it weren't for the rain we wouldn't have rivers that take us somewhere else."**

Let us pray: O God, we yearn for you in this weary wilderness. We thirst for the deepest longings to love you more. Your wrap around presence is all we need, for you Lord are our Savior and our life giving strength.

Amen.

Resources:

The Passion Translation Bible

The Text This Week: Scripture Study, Worship Links, and Resources

Father Cedric Pisegna Ministries- Houston Texas - www.frcedric.org

NRSV Study Bible