

Suffering: Can It Be Vicarious?

From the Midweek Lenten series:
Job and Jesus: The Mystery of Human Suffering

Text: Isaiah 53:1-11; Hebrews 12:1-2

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The question tonight is whether suffering can be vicarious, that is, on behalf of another or in the place of another. Or, perhaps, is suffering redemptive? Is it possible that there is a suffering in the world that works for the salvation of the world? Not thereby attempting to rationalize suffering or to take away anything that I have said in the last couple of weeks about suffering, but simply recognizing that suffering is a mystery in our human experience, and asking the question: beyond the fact that in so many cases we can simply give no reason for it, beyond the fact that we want to affirm that it is not punishment and there is not a causal connection between sin and suffering as we have seen in the Book of Job, nonetheless, is it possible that sometimes suffering has a positive, saving consequence? That's really the question.

In the Old Testament, as I said, obviously in that servant poem, there was the conviction that there would be one who would suffer and thereby bring salvation to many. Through this one, who bore the sin and the grief of the many, there would come salvation. "He will see the travail of his soul and be satisfied."

Interpreted by the Christian Church after Good Friday and Easter as a portrait of Jesus, it is very possible that Jesus fed his own soul on these servant songs. It is very possible that when Jesus moved away from John the Baptist with his calling down of the judgment of God on humankind and announcing the end world, that Jesus, moving away from that mentality of John, found his own identity and his own ministry in these servant poems: that he was not to be the Elijah who would come and bring down fire from heaven, but that he was to be the servant who in his exemplary life and in his suffering would effect salvation. It is difficult to say. We can't really say that. We can say that the New Testament Church certainly understood the life and the death of Jesus in those terms.

It seems as though there is something, not only in Israel's state tradition, but really in a wide spectrum of religious systems, or a wide spectrum of religious expressions that there is some sense that something has to happen to deal with

what is wrong in the world in order to make it right. That something has to be paid. Or that someone has to pay. Now it has certainly been a part of Old Testament faith as well as some interpretations of the New Testament at the heart of things, but it's not only biblical faith but also many other faiths as well have some kind of sacrificial system. It seems as though there is something very primal in the human person that believes that God must be appeased, that we are wrong and need to be put in the right, and that in order for that to be effected some offering has to be made. I say that's not only in the biblical tradition; it seems to be in religion in general, and I wonder then if it is not something very primal in the human person.

Is there hell to pay? For example, we read about genocide in Bosnia. Not just genocide or ethnic cleansing, but the methodical rape of Muslim women as a strategy of war in order to dehumanize, in order to impregnate with a generation of children over against whom there would be this equivocation. The systematic rape of women by an army of men as a military strategy. How does that make you feel? The last time the Balkans erupted there was a world conflagration, and then there arose a Hitler who conceived of the final solution using the Jewish people as scapegoats. Ripping families apart. The Holocaust. Six million Jews in the gas ovens. How does that make you *feel*? There is a report by the United Nations that has just come out which I think will probably (It's always a little risky to call these things at this point.) reveal the complicity of the United States government, the Reagan and Bush administrations, in the financing of the El Salvadorian conflict. They supported the army over against the guerilla groups that perhaps had as much atrocity on their side. Though there were voices raised about the fact that it needed to be a political solution, nonetheless, we continued to pour in guns and tanks and helicopters, and military advisors, supplying a regime that murdered the Catholic nuns. We were part of the configuration that gunned down Archbishop Romero who had taken the side of the poor in El Salvador. We the superpower, in order to make sure that Communism did not get an inroad into Central America, we are all tied up in the atrocities, the massacres of the people in El Salvador. That report will reveal more than we will want to know. I could not help but feel repulsion, revulsion, as I saw Alexander Haig, at a Senate committee testifying about the fact that perhaps the nuns were gunned down because they tried to run a blockade! How cynical can we be?

I just got a little tail end of a clip of a movie that's being produced. James Garner is going to be in it. I don't know what it is going to be called. It's about the sale of the R.J. Reynolds Company and the breaking up of all its subsidiaries in a move which turned that business into a cash cow, weakened the industry, split up the conglomerate, had absolutely no concern about the future of the companies or the economy of this nation, but was a bold and blatant grasp for immediate money, capital. Apparently they are making a movie about it now. I don't know what will happen, but it will be interesting to see. It is a story that happened two or three years ago. I had 100 shares of R.J. Reynolds, and a member of this congregation called me, my broker, who said, "It just went up 20 points. Do you

want to sell?" And I said, "Yes." If I had waited another week it would have gone up another 20 points. But Gordon Van Hoven said, "You can be a bull but you hadn't ought to be a hog." (Laughter) So I sold and made \$2,000. Somehow or other I am also in complicity with this move in corporate America that was a blatant grasp for immediate cash. Perhaps the problem with our economy is the fact that there has been so much greedy grasping for the short term, a refusal to pour the resources into research and development, or to look at the long term and the good of the nation. Who would look for the long term good of the nation? Well, obviously there are those of you here present who could speak to these financial questions with much greater erudition. I mean simply to be thinking about our world, and I am asking you: Is there anything wrong with the world?

Are there things that are so obscene, so unspeakably awful that it would be obscene to say that God can simply say, "Well, I forgive you"? Is it possible, given what I have set forth as admittedly extreme instances, but which nonetheless are part of a fabric of wrongdoing – is it possible that the only thing that needs to be done is for God to say, "You are forgiven"? I wonder if that primal thing in the gut of humankind has resulted in religions coming up with sacrifices and offerings. In Israel it became the conception of Isaiah 2, the innocent suffering on behalf of the others, the one bearing the guilt of the many. In the Christian Church, Jesus is seen as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." I think that's perhaps all of a piece, and it is all that kind of primal sense we have that it would not be decent for God to say, "It doesn't matter. I forgive you."

Now the problem that I have is that I don't believe that God is a God of retribution. I don't believe that God is going to line us up against the wall and say, "tit for tat." It seems to me that that system would fall right back into the trap of the thing that we saw in Job, where God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. The Book of Job said, "No, that's not so." And what I see in Jesus also says, "No, that's not so."

So, how does a God who would be gracious deal with that which is so terribly wrong in our world without just making light of it and pushing it aside as though it wasn't there? How does God deal with that awful evil and still grace us and redeem us? That I think is all tied up in the Mystery of Jesus' life and Jesus' death. Certainly Jesus died because he lived the way he lived. And living the way he lived he ran into the Hitlers and the Bosnias, the El Salvadors and the R.J. Reynolds of this world, which means he ran into all of us. And so in that sense he did die because of the sin of the world.

But I wonder, in all of the biblical metaphors that are used in trying to get a handle on this Mystery, I wonder if somehow or other in identifying with Jesus who felt abandoned, God was absorbing into God's self all of the pain and darkness and evil and wrong. I don't know. I just wonder if the Mystery of the cross, symbolized in the darkness and the cry of God's forsakenness, was the identification of God with Jesus, soaking up like a sponge all of the acid and

venom and bloodshed of human existence in order that God could say to all of us, "You are forgiven." Not cheaply because it doesn't really matter, but in a costly fashion because somehow or other God swallowed the poison, God's self in our brother Jesus, who drank the cup to the dregs. Somehow or other in the Christian Church there has been an understanding of Jesus as bearing our sin, as suffering in our place.

I suppose the power of the Christian Gospel stems from the fact that it speaks to that primal sense within us that somehow or other all of the hell that has been suffered in this world cannot simply be shoved aside, but needs to be absorbed, which is maybe the hell of Calvary and the desolation that Jesus experienced. If that is true, then maybe we can see Jesus in the history of Israel as in his life, living out what Israel was called to be: the servant of the Lord, and it is life living it out. Living it out as that one exemplar on behalf of us all, and being faithful even unto death, thereby fulfilling what we are called to be and calling us to follow in his footsteps. Then he gathers us into himself, absorbs all of our wrongs, and all of our pain, and all of our suffering, suffering for us and not without the fruit of salvation. For God raised Him up. God said, "It is enough."

And now to the whole world and the whole human race is the glad announcement that there is forgiveness. There is grace through Jesus Christ our Lord. I don't know, but it seems to me sometimes one can suffer on behalf of another and bring salvation.