

The Third Sunday in Lent A 2023
March 12, 2023
John 4:1-42; Exodus 17:1-7; Romans 5:1-12

“Blessed are those who suffer.” That’s the theme for our Sunday and Wednesday Lenten worship services this week. BUT as I said in the email I sent out last night, I want you to notice that it's not the suffering itself that is "blessed." It's the suffering people who are blessed. I'll have more to say about how and why they are blessed, but first we need to ask: Who are the suffering people? The short answer is: Every. Single. One. Of. Us. Sooner or later, we all suffer in some way because suffering is an integral part of being human.

Sometimes our suffering is physical, as is the case in today’s Scripture story from Exodus 17. In the midst of their forty-year sojourn in the desert, the Israelites pitch camp one night at Rephidim, but when they discover there’s no water to drink, they’re NOT happy campers! All day long, while trudging through the hot, dry, windy desert, they’ve been looking forward to a nice, cool, refreshing drink of water. But NO! Once again, it seems Moses – and God – have let them down, kind of like that time not so long ago when they were hungry and had no food to eat until they complained and God made manna rain down from heaven.... Now, in today’s story, the Israelites are thirsty, so their suffering is primarily physical, but it also has an emotional and spiritual component to it. For one thing, they’re afraid of what will happen to them if they don’t get some water, and fear of death is certainly a kind of suffering. Their other fear is that God has abandoned them. This is revealed in verse 7, where Moses names the place “Massah and Meribah,” which means “test and quarrel.” The text states that Moses does so because the Israelites tested the Lord and quarreled, saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?...” I think you and I would all agree that feeling separated from God is a profound kind of suffering.

Of course, there are other types of suffering: chronic pain that wracks individual human bodies night and day; terrible diseases that claim the lives of our loved ones all too soon; mental health disorders that affect not only the lives of those afflicted, but also their loved ones; the emotional suffering that results from broken relationships; the shame and stigma of being abused; and the ongoing, day-to-day exhaustion of serving as a long-term caregiver is an often unrecognized, yet truly debilitating form of suffering. Of course, I would be remiss if I failed to mention that today is the third anniversary of the global suffering of COVID, which inflicted physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering on all God’s children. Three years ago today was the first day we were forced to cancel in-person worship here at Zoar and make the incredible leap to online worship.... And this list is just a sampling of the many types of suffering that are part of human life here on earth.

This week as I’ve pondered what it means to say “blessed are those who suffer,” my memory took me back to the congregation I served in my first call as a young associate pastor. The congregation of St. James dates to 1890, so it’s just a couple of years older than Zoar. To the right of the main entrance to the church building, there’s a cornerstone that bears the inscription 1907, but it’s actually St. James’s baptismal font that I want to tell you about. Like the cornerstone, the marble baptismal font was commissioned in the early 1900s, and the edges of its round bowl bear the words, “Suffer the little children to come unto me.” Of course, these are the words of Jesus, according to the King James Version of the Bible. Contemporary translations sound more like this, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them.” So, to state

the obvious, the word “suffer” carved into St. James’s baptismal font carries a connotation that’s quite different from the meaning word “suffer” holds for us today.

And yet that font, which stands near the steps to the altar, has no doubt witnessed the type of suffering with which you and I are well acquainted. You see, for over 100 years the font has stood silently, as thousands of people filed past on their way to receive Holy Communion. On any given Sunday, some who walk past the font are bursting with joy, while others are suffering deep inside, and most find themselves somewhere in between..... I remember one weekday morning the senior pastor called me into the sanctuary and pointed toward the font. Immediately, I saw that the red carpet around the font was littered with small chunks of marble. As my stunned eyes traveled upward, I noticed the divots on the stand and in the baptismal bowl. We later learned that this was the work of a teenager, who was angry with God over the death of their beloved grandmother. This young person’s mental health was affected in a way that caused them to lash out at the church because they perceived God to be the source of their suffering.... Just so you know, I didn’t get to hear the end of this story, so I can’t tell you whether this young person received the loving support and healing they needed, but I hope and pray that they did.

Thinking about St. James’s damaged baptismal font also leads me to wonder whether that young person may have encountered some damaging and inaccurate theology somewhere along the way. Were they taught to see God as distant and harsh? As judgmental and punishing?... I don’t know the answer, but the question is still worth asking because bad theology can be hazardous to one’s spiritual health and can, in some cases, lead to great suffering. For example, I think of the many LGBTQ children of God who’ve been rejected by the church because they’re – quote/unquote -- “an abomination” and who’ve been told by church members that the same God who created them couldn’t possibly love them. This kind of judgmental theology has caused – and continues to cause – more suffering than you or I could ever imagine..

That said, I can tell you that I’ve also heard many stories of suffering people who, instead of lashing out in anger, have turned away from the church and from God. Of course, underlying this anger is grief, which is one of the hardest and most universal forms of suffering. Again, over the years, I’ve met a number of suffering people whose deep grief following the sudden death of a loved one has led them to reject God and the church. Sometimes these folks explain that they want nothing to do with a God who causes such pain and suffering. Perhaps you know someone who feels this way.... If you do, then you’re probably also aware of how painful it is for them and how helpless we may feel when someone we love turns away from faith.... So, this is where I want to remind all of us that God will never give up on any of God’s children, so, you and I shouldn’t give up on them, either! We may have to give our loved ones a lot of space and be patient with them for a good long while, but we should strive to be intentional in loving them and watching for “sliding door moments” that might lead to deeper conversation.... Never forget, friends, that our God is always reaching out to offer blessings in many and various ways. Even now God is working working in the midst of human suffering to bring healing and hope to this whole beautiful, yet broken world. And in case you didn’t recognize it, that’s the gospel in a nutshell! God so loves the world that God sends Jesus, who joins us in our suffering, in order to reconcile all God’s children – that is, in order to bring us into relationship with God, so that we may receive the gift of eternal life. As Jesus himself will pray in John 17, “And this is eternal life: that they may know you, the one true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”

So, here's the thing about eternal life that many Christians don't "get": You and I don't have to wait until we die and go to heaven to receive the gift of eternal life. According to Jesus, the blessing of eternal life begins here and now, in the very moment you and I enter into relationship with God. And the blessing continues as long as we abide – that is, as long as we continue – in our relationship with God.

Now, earlier I said that God won't ever give up on God's suffering children who turn away, and that's true. BUT it's equally true that when our pain and suffering lead us to turn away from God and close our hearts, you and I won't be able to receive the life-giving blessing we need to strengthen and sustain us. You see, true love is mutual, and so, God will never force God's gift on us. Instead, God freely offers the gift through Jesus, in the hope that God's children will repent – that is, in the hope that we'll turn back to God with hearts that are open and ready to receive God's gift. To say it another way: All you and I need to do is lift up our hearts and say "yes," and God will begin to bless us right in the midst of all our sufferings. How does God's blessing of presence and promise come to us? It might take the form of a word or an act of kindness that comes through one of God's messengers – messengers who will probably a lot like us! Or something might mysteriously touch our hearts, causing us to suddenly realize that God has been there with us all along, giving us the peace and strength we need to get through the day.... There's one more thing I should mention, since we have the reading from Romans 5 before us today. If you and I think about God's blessing coming NOT to individuals, but to the whole church community in times of suffering, then Paul's words to the Church in Rome ring true. According to Paul, as members of the Church, which is the Body of Christ in the world, we can have confidence in the midst of our sufferings because we know that "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us...." And there's more!... While it's true that God will bless the disciples of Jesus where we are and as we are, it's also true that God will never leave us stranded in the wilderness of suffering. On the contrary, God's blessing and God's promise will give us healing and new life, so that we may go out into the world to be a blessing for others.

So, what about you, friends? Can you think of a time in your life when you've experienced blessing in the midst of suffering? How did this experience change you? Who or what was the messenger of the blessing? Have you ever offered a blessing to someone else who was suffering? What was that encounter like? I encourage all of us to ponder these questions in the coming week and to share any insights that come to you. Of course, you get to decide whether and with whom you'll share, but I can promise you that if you do choose to share, there will be blessing in the sharing!

Thanks be to God for the life, death, and resurrection of our Savior, Jesus Christ, through which the truth is revealed: "Blessed are you who suffer, for you will be healed and given new life, so that you may be a blessing for the sake of this world God loves so deeply." Amen.