February 8, 2015
Matthew 27:27-31
Jesus’ Death: What About Suffering?

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Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor’s headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

We have been looking for the last few weeks at Martin Thielen’s book, What’s the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian? We looked at things Christians don’t need to believe. I shared with you that I reject any religion that claims God causes cancer, car wrecks or other catastrophes. I reject religion that claims good Christians don’t doubt. I reject religion that says it’s okay for Christians to be judgmental and obnoxious. We talked about how Jesus is what we believe as Christians. Jesus is who we hold onto. When God becomes flesh in Jesus, God joins us, God becomes one with us in all that we are and in all that we do.

 We talked about how what mattered most to Jesus was relationships, with God and with others. We talked about grace, even with our flaws, Jesus loves and accepts us as beloved children of God. We talked about how Jesus showed us that God primarily works through people. And last week we talked about what brings us fulfillment. For Jesus it was serving others.

 Tonight “The Walking Dead” begins again. “The Walking Dead” is a show about zombies, and it is very graphic and there is a lot of blood and violence, but it isn’t really about zombies. “The Walking Dead” is about us, it is about human nature. What do we do when life as we know it is over? What makes some of us adapt better when zombies have taken over? How do we trust again? How do we grieve and where do we find hope? When we make mistakes, can we find forgiveness from others and from ourselves? Will our character rise above our challenges and affirm our values in the most difficult of circumstances? The amazing thing to me about “The Walking Dead” is that it doesn’t take too long before you realize that the humans are way scarier than the zombies.[[1]](#footnote-1) How do we affirm our values in the most difficult of circumstances?

 This week we talk about the big questions of faith. Why do bad things happen? Why does suffering exist? Why did my friend get cancer? Why did the airplane in Taiwan crash? Why did my parents get divorced? Why did I lose my job? Why did my grandfather have to suffer so much at the end? Why? Why does suffering exist? Why does God allow suffering? How do we make sense of it?

Suffering can stop us in our faith walk and can stop us from growing closer to God. The great writer, Barbara Brown Taylor says in her book “God in Pain”, “Suffering can be the great killer of faith. It can compress the human soul into a knot of bitter pain and explode our lives into a thousand brittle pieces. Or suffering can be the way that we explore the death of our humanity, and faith, our capacity for love and beauty, our ability to forgive, our kinship with God, and each other.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

The movie Patch Adams stars Robin Williams who is an unconventional doctor who believes humor and compassion are the most important tools that a doctor can use. But his idealism is shattered when a woman that he has fallen in love with and who has helped him start a free clinic, is murdered by one of their psychotic patients.

There is a scene in the movie where Patch Adams is standing on a cliff and you are not sure if he is going to jump or not when he has a monologue with God. He looks up to the heavens and says, “So answer me, please. Tell me what you are doing. You create man. Man suffers enormous amounts of pain. Man dies. Maybe you should have had just a few more brainstorming sessions prior to creation. You rested on the 7th day, maybe you should have spent that day on compassion.”

Most of us could have had that conversation with God. How can we have a God who allows suffering and a God who is unable to prevent suffering? Either God is not good or God is not all-powerful. We don’t know all of the answer to those big questions – those questions that ordinary people and wise theologians have struggled with for centuries – questions about why there is suffering in our lives and in the world. But I know that God is not the creator of evil or suffering.

God created laws of nature, God created human nature, God created free will. Suffering is not punishment from a cruel God. In Harold Kushner’s book, “When Bad Things Happen to Good People”, he says, “I no longer hold God responsible for illnesses, accidents, and natural disasters, because I realize that I gain little and I lose so much when I blame God for those things. I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it, more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make children suffer and die, for whatever exalted reason. Some years ago, when the "death of God" theology was a fad, I remember seeing a bumper sticker that read "My God is not dead; sorry about yours." I guess my bumper sticker reads, "My God is not cruel; sorry about yours." God does not cause our misfortunes. Some are caused by bad luck, some are caused by bad people, and some are simply an inevitable consequence of our being human and being mortal, living in a world of inflexible natural laws. The painful things that happen to us are not punishments for our misbehavior, nor are they in any way part of some grand design on God's part. Because the tragedy is not God's will, we need not feel hurt or betrayed by God when tragedy strikes. We can turn to God for help in overcoming it, precisely because we can tell ourselves that God is as outraged by it as we are.”

So, where is God when suffering occurs? God is with us in the midst of suffering. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou are with me. Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me (Psalm 23). It is faith and the amazing grace of Jesus that is the assurance that God is for us and that God is on our side, no matter what. What proof do we have that God is with us in our suffering?

Our scripture for today comes from the Gospel of Matthew, “Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor’s headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.”

Where is God in the midst of our suffering? God is right smack in the middle of it. And we learn that in the cross of Jesus. Jesus knew pain. Jesus knew suffering. And God redeemed Jesus’ death and God can redeem the worst that can happen in our lives and turn it into God’s healing and our hope.

That night when I was a junior in high school waiting with my family all night long while my stepdad had surgery as a result of injuries from a car crash, that night God began to redeem our pain and our suffering. God working through God’s people began to show up at the hospital to wait with us, to cry with us, to be present with us. God was with us in as we waited in the waiting room.

When my stepdad died, I realized that life was short and precious, and that I wanted to make a difference in my life. I wanted my life, no matter how short it was, I wanted my life to matter. My stepdad’s life had mattered, he had loved others, and he was kind and compassionate, and he had loved church and singing in the church choir. I had endured this great pain in his early death, and his life showed me how I wanted to live.

A few years ago one of my relatives had an eye injury and he had to postpone his graduate school. He was so angry at God and he asked God to talk to him. When God did not talk to him, my relative decided that God did not exist. I had seen God walking with him throughout the whole process. When the doctors were able to quickly identify what was wrong, when his family members, some who had driven 7 hours to get there, all gathered in the hospital room during the surgery, when the doctors shared that only 4 other people in the entire world had had surgery on that particular damaged nerve, God was present. He had not spoken to his brother in two years, and his brother came to Dallas for the surgery. I could not understand how this relative could not see that God was with him. I felt like God was right there with him.

We are people of faith who serve a crucified God. And the cross of Jesus tells us that God is present in the midst of our suffering. The cross tells us that God enters human suffering, God works to relieve our suffering, and God will ultimately redeem our suffering. God is present to walk with us through suffering and to redeem it. That is what God does. That is what God promises. That is the message of the cross. God took pain and wounded-ness, God took the worst that we can do to each other and three days later God turned it into goodness and healing and new life. Praise be to God. Amen.

1. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/02/why-i-love-the-walking-dead/?utm\_source=feedburner&utm\_medium=email&utm\_campaign=Feed%3A+davidlose%2FIsqE+%28...In+the+Meantime%29 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering” Abingdon Press, 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)