

March 14, 2021 Fourth Sunday in Lent

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Psalm 107:1-9, 17-32, 43

Are Your Sufferings Beloved to You?

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Everybody loves a parade, particularly my cat. When she was a kitten she quickly created a routine. She would wake me up in the middle of the night to walk through the apartment to go to her bowl of food so I could watch her eat. To this day, sometimes she will just cry until I follow her on a parade up to the third floor of our house which she has claimed as her own.

During some of these middle of the night escapades I will stub my toe on a table or chair leg along the way. The thwack of my toe is shortly followed by some creative expletives, decrying the existence of the offending piece of furniture. "How dare that table leg attack me viciously in the dark!"

Yes, I do know that the table leg was just minding its own business when my toe came along. But, I was in pain and somebody or something had to be held responsible. I suppose that cat of mine (her name by the way is Sassparilla the Singing Gorilla, but you can call her Sass) could be held responsible for creating our late night field trip. But she is far too cute to be held responsible for absolutely anything. And, perhaps I could be responsible for not walking as carefully as I could. But, I am already suffering from a stinging toe, it does not seem right to put anything more on me. What this little vignette exposes about me is that I still have an inner three

year old that is ever ready to shake an angry fist at the world when I experience even the mildest form of suffering.

Suffering is a common denominator of the human condition. The degree to which it is present in our lives and the types we experience, run the gamut, but, one and all, we suffer. Sometimes we suffer because of the actions of our own brokenness. We harm ourselves. Sometimes we suffer due to the brokenness of others. And sometimes we suffer just because human frailty is oh so vulnerable to this world of ours.

How we respond to suffering reveals something about who we are. My little cat parade story reveals something about who I am. Rabbi Allan Lew shares a story of how someone else responded to the sufferings and disappointments of this world.

"A colleague told me about a woman in his congregation who died recently, leaving behind an ethical will, a long, warm-hearted testimony as to what the meaning of her life had been. The document was a study in gratitude. This was an extremely grateful woman. She wrote about how blessed and fortunate she was to have lived the life she had lived. She was grateful..." (Lew, p. 66-67)

I will stop the account here because basically she was grateful for everyone and everything in her life. Now, one might assume this meant she had been blessed with an extraordinarily fortunate life. But at the end of these many recitations of her gratitude Rabbi Lew writes this, "My colleague's first thought upon reading this document was, 'Is this woman kidding herself?'"

We learn that this woman's life had all of the imperfections of many of our lives and perhaps more than many of us. The people in her life possessed all of the ordinary

limitations and foibles we have. The circumstances of her life had more than their share of less than ideal outcomes. There was absolutely nothing extraordinary in this woman's life. What was extraordinary was her, was how she related and responded to the people and events in her life. She received everything in her life with gratitude. With this perspective even the suffering and misfortune in her life were cause for praise.

Lead me there, Lord, please lead me there.

Rabbi Lew goes on to tell a tale from the Talmud that is both evocative and theologically very risky. Rabbi Hiyya Bar Abba falls deathly ill and Rabbi Yochanan comes to comfort him.

"Are your sufferings beloved to you?" Rabbi Yochanan asks. He seems to be invoking the doctrine of *yisurin shel ahavah* (an affliction born of love, a suffering God has visited upon us out of his boundless love for us) and particularly the idea that if we receive our suffering in love, it will become a suffering with a reward in the end. But Rabbi Hiyya seems annoyed at this intrusion of theological correctness in the midst of his suffering. 'Neither my sufferings, nor any reward I might receive for them are beloved to me.' Hiyya replies. "Give me your hand then," Rabbi Yochanan says, and Rabbi Hiyya gives him his hand and he is healed. (Lew, p. 70)

I will never, ever, ever say that suffering is a good thing. I will never believe that God wishes for us to suffer. I will never believe God brings suffering upon us to teach us a lesson. But what can be said without question is that suffering will visit all of us. So if it will certainly come to visit, is there anything at all to be gained from it?

A scholar of Psalm 107 quotes from verse 43 and writes, "Persons who are 'wise' and 'heed these things' (v. 43) will

realize that there is never a time when they are not in 'trouble' (vv. 2, 6, 13, 19, 28). Thus, crying out to God, living in dependence upon God, is not simply an emergency measure but a way of life...(McCann, p. 1119)

Suffering will come. It will find its way into our lives, all of our lives. How shall we respond to it? We can curse the world. We can blame ourselves. We can blame others. We can blame our God. We can marinate in our anger and frustration until bile and bitterness flavor our relationship to everyone and everything.

Or we could use it as an opportunity to grow closer to our God. Every experience in our lives from the mundane to the extraordinary creates a chance for us to turn toward our creator. And times of suffering are no different. They remind us of our inherent vulnerability. They remind us we do not control the world and in some cases even the outcomes of our lives. They awaken us to the reality that as much as we seek to protect ourselves we are ever in a precarious position of limitation and mortality. They allow us to see we have needs beyond what we can ever fulfill on our own. The promises of God's mercy and redemption in Jesus Christ become more than a pleasant construct for us to daydream about on a Sunday morning but a palpable salvation for which hunger and prize above all else.

I am supremely unqualified to speak about suffering. What others have experienced make my sufferings seem inconsequential. So I am keenly aware of what must be said next. We can never ask Rabbi Yochanan's question. It is never our place to ask someone in pain, "Are your sufferings beloved to you?" It is an audacious question that is inappropriate to direct toward

anyone. But it is an audacious question we can ask ourselves. "Are my sufferings beloved to me?" How can what I am going through right now draw me closer to the divine? Can I recognize that whenever I am suffering it is an opportunity for me to receive God's healing mercy and grace into my life?

Yes, easy to talk about when standing in a pulpit in a sanctuary, not so easy to do when your body is wracked with pain, or in the midst of an anxiety attack at 3 AM in the morning, or wondering where your family will sleep while living under an impending eviction.

But in this season of Lent we know the direction of our journey. We are following Jesus as he makes his way to the cross. And the cross will lead us to the resurrection. In a few minutes we will celebrate Travis' baptism and be reminded that when we are baptized we are invited to join Jesus in his death and in his resurrection.

We are called to be resurrection people. We are called to believe that Good Friday leads to Easter. And not only that, but that for every Good Friday there is an Easter. Resurrection is singular and specific but it is also all-encompassing and transcendent. There is not a single moment of suffering, not a single brokenness, not a single moment of failure, not a single unfortunate or tragic circumstance in this world that is not being sought out by God's abundant and relentless mercy. And perhaps we can never as deeply claim this truth as when we are most in need of receiving this abundant and relentless mercy.

I do not have quite as many late night parades with my cat anymore. I have moved her food bowl to beside the side of the bed where I sleep. I think she likes to know that the one who feeds her is by her side while she eats. I can understand that.

I hunger to know that God is by my side. But when life is sailing along swimmingly I do not pay attention to that hunger all that closely. I let it slip to the back of my consciousness as I enjoy life and how well I am living it. But when I trip and fall in one or another, that hunger rises up, front and center before me and I am reminded of the one I need so dearly.

I wish I could say that, yes, my sufferings are beloved to me. I still have a little too much of an inner three year old for that. But I do know how deeply I have felt God's abundant and relentless mercy when I have needed it the most.

As we continue in these Lenten days let us be reminded that the only way we get to Easter is through Good Friday. So let us praise the Lord in sunshine and in rain, and in every circumstance in which we find ourselves.

Thanks be to God, in all seasons. Amen.

Lew, Allan, *Be Still and Get Going*, Little, Brown, and Company, New York, 2005.

McCann, J. Clinton Jr., *The New Interpreter's Bible: vol. IV*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1996.