

A Journey to Hope: Suffering
Mark 14:43-64
March 21, 2010

A journey to hope!

Those that were at the Ash Wednesday service heard me make a comparison between cruising and our journey through life. To help reinforce this metaphor I had a picture of a cruise ship on the promotional flyer for the season of lent.

When I think of cruising I think of fun and adventure. You eat, you relax, you eat, you take in a show, you eat, you visit a port, and then you eat. Lot of eating happens on a cruise ship.

Taking a cruise is about getting away, it's about leaving the stresses of the world for just a little while. But even on a cruise ship real life drama occurs. Those that have been on a number of cruises can share stories of critically ill passengers being taken off the ship. There have been cases where death has occurred.

Just because you're on vacation it doesn't mean you are exempt from the harsh realities of life. No matter where you are or what you are doing, bad things can happen. People have strokes and heart attacks on ships. There are even times like earlier this month when rogue waves slam into a ship causing the deaths of several passengers.

On our life journey there is a very good chance that we will experience some kind of suffering. The question is how will we respond? As Christians we can look to the bible to find answers as to how we are to handle suffering.

As we read the passion narratives in the Bible, the story of the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus, we can learn of the tremendous suffering Jesus endured. Though the most obvious, the physical suffering was not the only pain Jesus dealt with.

Emotionally Jesus had the pain of being betrayed by one of his friends, denied by another and deserted by still others. Spiritually Jesus also

struggled with a sense of being abandoned by God. Remember on the cross Jesus cried out “my God why have you forsaken me”.

Let’s see then what we can gain from Jesus.

The first lesson is the awareness that suffering can take on many dimensions. There is the physical pain that so many suffer, but there is also spiritual and emotional suffering. So often that emotional and spiritual pain is much worst than anything physical we have to deal with.

To help us cope with the pain we have the same tools that I mentioned last week when I talked about temptation. When we are down, we have family and friends to lean on. Though they can’t remove the pain, they can make it bearable.

Unfortunately for many folks the first response to suffering is isolation. In pain, one feels like holding up alone in their misery. You don’t feel like talking, you just want to be by yourself.

Though that reaction is understandable, one is better cared for if others are allowed to come and offer love and support. If we look at the Book of Job we can see that conversation is not even needed.

After losing his family, his health, and his wealth, Job is sitting alone in sack cloth and ash. This was what one did in Job’s day when bad things happened. Sack cloth and ash symbolized grief and mourning. If you remember the story, three of Job’s friends came and sat with him for 3 days. They said nothing, they just showed their support for their broken friend by being with him.

A physical presence has a comforting power. I remember when I was a child. When I was sick I always felt better when my mother was sitting with me. Though it is tough for the care givers, I believe this is why those with declining health want their spouse with them all the time.

The saying goes: misery loves company. There is something to be said about being with others when you are suffering.

What if you are alone? What if you are not near family and have no good friends? Even in that situation you are never alone. God is always with us.

Though he had a few moments of doubt, Jesus knew God was with him. It was by the strength and courage that Jesus received through God that enabled him to go through all the suffering.

That relationship with God was built on many hours of prayer. When we spend time in prayer when life is calm, we will have a connection to God that we can call upon when we are suffering.

Depending on what has happened to us or a loved one, it might be difficult to trust in God. We believe God should protect us and those that we love from pain and suffering. Unfortunately even our faith doesn't shield us from accidents, disease, disasters, or the bad choices of other people. When we are angry with God, we should know that is an understandable reaction. We should not feel guilty about that or try to deny those feelings. My hope is that with time we can see how God can help us with our healing.

It is important to remember one critical point, God does not cause suffering. If we go back to the story of Job, once his friends did open their mouths what they said was more harmful than helpful. Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar all tried to convince Job he must have deserved his losses. All Job had to do was admit his sin, ask God for forgiveness and forget about his plea of innocence.

As I read my Bible, especially the New Testament, I find a God that loves us, a God that suffers with us, a God that wants us to succeed. I do not find a God that randomly doles out punishment. Given the number of innocent people that suffer, how could God be involved in any of that?

Sure we may suffer consequences of poor decisions, but it is of our own or someone else's making. Putting the blame on God may give us some comfort, but it cuts us off from the help God can give.

The last thing the Bible as well as recent day experiences can teach us is that good can come from suffering. Except for the crucifixion, it's not God's plan to cause a bad thing to happen so others can benefit. If however we can gain strength from God and others, we can take a negative and turn it into a positive.

I remember when I was serving the Orchard United Methodist Church. We were encouraging people to be organ donors. To help spread the message

we brought in the father who lost his teenaged daughter to an accident. They were able to use her organs and help save a life of another person. Out of this father's suffering of losing a daughter, he became an advocate for life saving organ donations. There are many other stories of persons going through a terrible time only to come out of it stronger, and dedicated to making the world a better place.

And even if we make it through our own suffering without the desire to make a difference, the experience will make a difference to us.

I close by reading something from the original "Chicken Soup for the Soul". It's called *Faith!*

We're a rugged breed, us quads. If we weren't, we wouldn't be around today. Yes, we're a rugged breed. In many ways, we've been blessed with a savvy and spirit that isn't given to everybody.

And let me say that this refusal of total or full acceptance of one's disability all hooks up with one thing - faith, an almost divine faith.

Down in the reception room of the institute of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, over on the East River at 400 East 34th Street in New York City, there's a bronze plaque that's riveted to the wall. During the months of coming back to the Institute for treatment – two or three times a week – I rolled through that reception room many times, coming and going. But I never quite made the time to pull over to one side and read the words on that plaque that were written, it's said, by an unknown Confederate soldier. Then one afternoon, I did. I read it and then read it again. When I finished it for the second time, I was near to bursting – not in despair, but with an inner glow that had me straining to grip the arms of my wheelchair. I'd like to share it with you.

A Creed for Those Who Have Suffered

*I asked God for strength, that I might achieve.
I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey...*

*I asked for health, that I might do great things.
I was given infirmity that I might do better things...*

*I asked for riches, that I might be happy.
I was given poverty, that I might be wise...*

*I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men
I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God...*

*I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life.
I was given life, that I might enjoy all things...*

I got nothing I asked for-but everything I had hoped for.

Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.

I am, among men, most richly blessed.