

August 28, 2011

Matthew 16:21-28

With Us in Everything

A young man stood before the television cameras this week, explaining that his wife suffers from post-partum depression. He was clearly grief-stricken. The anguish he felt was obvious. His wife was accused of killing their newborn son by tossing him out of the fourth floor of a parking garage. He explained that she was not in her right mind, that postpartum depression was the cause of this terrible tragedy.

This depression, he said, was made worse because the baby was born with multiple disabilities.

His wife faces trial, and prosecutors say that there is evidence that not only did she know what she was doing, but that she planned it in advance. Whatever the facts are in the case, it's a terrible tragedy for this family. The wife and the husband are both suffering tremendously. That young mother would not have thrown her baby to his death unless she were in an unbearable amount of pain.

So where was God? If God is good all the time, why was that baby born with a number of serious problems? Why did that mother feel such a deep depression that she was driven to this terrible act?

Where was God for the young husband who has lost his son and maybe his wife as well?

We ask this question in many situations. Where is God when an innocent person is killed by a drunk driver? Where is God when a war veteran returns to his job as a policeman and is shot in the face and killed?

Where is God when people die in great pain, victims of cancer?

Where is God when hurricanes and earthquakes and tornadoes and floods kill and destroy?

Some people say that bad things happen because God is punishing us for our sins, so God is on the other side of the tragedies, causing them.

But Jesus had a different answer.

Luke tells us that when Jesus was told that people were killed by Pilate as they worshiped God, he asked them, "Do you think that they were worse sinners than anyone else? And what about the 18 men who were killed when the tower fell on them? No! They weren't worse sinners than anyone else! Everyone needs to repent!"

And then he told a parable of a fig tree whose owner wanted to cut it down, but the gardener convinced him to wait until he had nurtured it for another year.

The owner of the tree in that parable is NOT God! God is the gardener who always gives us another chance---one more year, with more care and love. One more year to spread manure which the tree will use as food to make fruit....

Jesus was clear that bad things are not punishment from God, that everyone needs to repent but not everyone is struck down by a disaster or tragedy.

So, where **was** God when Pilate was killing people in the Temple? Where **was** God when the tower fell?

Where is God when bad things happen, when we suffer?

This morning's passage from Exodus tells us where God was when the Israelites were suffering as slaves in Egypt!

God was over on Mt. Sinai speaking to Moses from a burning bush as part of the plan to free them! And God told Moses that he would go with him to tell him what to say to Pharaoh!

So one place God is when we're suffering just might be somewhere working to end the suffering. God just might be with us, telling us what to say and do to make things better, both for ourselves and for someone else.

The writer of Exodus put that episode from Moses' life in scripture so that the Israelites would remember for generations to come that God was the one who brought them out of Egypt.

The story of how Moses was called to bring them out of slavery is also a reminder to us that God calls even the most unlikely, reluctant people to do his work in ending the suffering of others.

Our reading from the Gospel according to Matthew is also part of the answer to the question, "Where is God when we suffer?"

At this point in his ministry, after he had fed the 5000 and healed the sick and named Peter as the Rock on which he would build his church, Jesus began to show the disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things before he was killed and then rose again on the third day.

Peter evidently missed the bit about rising again, getting stuck on the suffering and dying part.

He reacted much the same way that any of us react when we find out that someone we love has cancer or another painful, deadly illness, or for whatever reason is facing suffering and death. He immediately goes into denial and anger!

“No!” he shouts, “It’s not going to happen! It can’t happen! I won’t let it! “

Peter loved his Lord and friend. He didn’t want bad things to happen to him! No one wants someone they love to go through anything like that!

And even more than that, Peter had already recognized Jesus as the Messiah, and his idea of what the Messiah was going to do did not include suffering and dying! Undoubtedly Peter expected Jesus to continue to alleviate suffering, not to go through it himself! So he exclaims---“No, Lord! This won’t happen to you!”

And then Jesus says, “Get behind me, Satan! You have become a stone that I might stumble over!” Peter, the Rock, has become a stone for Jesus to trip on.

Jesus had already passed the temptations of Satan in the wilderness--the temptations to do anything to take care of his physical needs, of testing God, and of grabbing power. The temptation to avoid pain and suffering was another temptation that Jesus faced, and Peter had only added to it.

Jesus would face that temptation again in the Garden of Gethsemane, and he prayed as he wrestled with it, “Father, take this cup from me.” And again, he stayed strong.

Peter was only being human. He didn't want Jesus to suffer. Why should Jesus suffer? He could avoid it simply by not going to Jerusalem!

Just like suffering is part of the human condition, so is wanting to protect those we love from suffering.

When the first hearers of the Gospel according to Matthew listened to this passage being read, the Good News for them was that Jesus was willing to suffer and die, and most especially that he would rise again!

It's Good News for us, too, because the way that Jesus Christ saves us is by being with us in our suffering, by being with us no matter what we are going through, no matter how bad it is.

Where is God when bad things happen? Where is God when an earthquake strikes followed only a few days later by a hurricane? Where is God when wildfires burn? Where is God when people are sick and when they die in senseless accidents?

Where is God when we are going through the worst times of our lives?

Jesus Christ has shown us where God is----suffering beside us, or more accurately, ahead of us.

I once heard a man say that “A god who suffers is not God.” He was wrong. A god who is not willing to suffer the worst that the world has to give is not God. A god who avoids suffering is a coward, powerless, and irrelevant.

The God we worship is just the opposite. The God we worship goes before us, shows us what is on the other side of suffering and death, and shows us how to get to resurrection and peace. He shows us mercy and forgiveness. He gives us endless grace.

And that grace means that God does not send suffering into our lives. Grace means that God does not abandon us when we suffer. Grace means that everyone is loved more than we can possibly imagine----loved so that we will follow Christ right into the place he has prepared for us.

And the way that he has prepared that place, the way that he has prepared US for that place, is to suffer and die just as we do.

Not wanting to be immune from the human condition, Christ entered into it so that we can enter into his divine nature with him in return.

So what difference does this make?

All the difference in the world.

Someone once said that we are born with a God-sized hole in our hearts. We spend our lives trying to fill that hole. Some of us try food or drugs or money or any one of many unhealthy habits.

None of them heal our hearts or ease our loneliness. They don't fill the hole. They may coat the edges for a time so that the pain lessens, but then they wear off and that deep pain of loneliness comes back.

The loneliness that only God can heal with limitless grace and unconditional love.

The loneliness that cries out for the presence of God but is only alleviated when we recognize that God is with us no matter what we are going through.

We can open our eyes to God's presence and we can also open our ears to the voice of God like Moses did and be obedient when God calls us to act as God's presence when other people are suffering. We can take steps to free others from the slavery of suffering and pain in response to God's call.

We can pray for others, we can do what we can to heal their hearts, we can just sit with those who are suffering or maybe walk with them for a little while on their journeys and help them find comfort in their search for an end to loneliness.

We can witness to the presence of God with us as the healer of that loneliness. We can be the hands, the feet, the heart of Christ in this world.

The young father who is grieving for his baby boy and defending his wife is suffering more than I can imagine, but I can pray for him and for his wife. I pray for them to feel the presence of the eternal God, and to know in their hearts that God is with them even in this dark, frightening time in their lives.

I pray the same for each one of you, whatever you are going through. Amen.