

1 Lent – Year B – March 4, 2009 - Homily
Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-9, 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15
Susan E. Wilmot

I love the question, “Why?” although it rarely leads me to an answer that satisfies my curious nature. I sometimes think that when I meet Jesus face to face He might laugh and say something like, “so, I understand you have a few questions you want answered?” The question of suffering, often framed as the *problem* of human suffering continues to confuse and confound us, and to keep us busy with questions. Why does a loving God allow suffering? Why does a loving God not intervene in our suffering? And so on. I’d be very surprised if you had never asked God this humungous “why?” question during times of stress and pain in your own life.

Martin Luther says this about this evening’s passage from first Peter, “This is a strange text and certainly a more obscure passage than any other passage in the New Testament. I still do not know for sure what the apostle means.” Even though it is possible that Luther, like you and me, fell into the trap of feeling the need for certainty, according to Eugene Boring, “the primary meaning is clear, both to Luther and to us; Christians are called to endure unjust suffering for the sake of others.” Suffering for the sake of others is not exactly what attracted me to Christianity. In fact, Boring’s conclusion is what I call a real downer. I wonder if Martin Luther thought it was a strange text because it doesn’t seem to have any good news in it. As much as we appreciate intellectually that being a disciple of our Lord Jesus means following the One who got crucified without cause, I suspect that most of us are not lining up to be martyrs, whatever the eternal reward might be.

Peter was writing to a church that was suffering great persecution. This is a common theme in the earliest days of Christianity, and still part of being a Christian in several regions of the world today. So what is the Word in Peter’s first letter to the church saying to you and me, here in the beautiful White Mountains where we are free to practice our faith without fear of persecution? The context of suffering is important. So is our faith and our general attitude towards life. What woman would not suffer the pain of childbirth in order to deliver her child, however inconvenient the place or time? No amount of pain can diminish a parents’ love for their child. How many of us have suffered physical pain at least once at the hands of a dentist, yet we still take care of our teeth? Our capacity for pain of all kinds can grow and expand in many ways, not least because of the context that makes all the difference in a believer’s life. Our context is always surrounded and enfolded by faith in Christ. We are even stronger and more able to respond to pain and suffering, because we trust in God, we know that God redeems all things, and heals all hurts. This is the key to the lesson from first Peter.

The greatest tragedy of any life is meaningless suffering. One of the greatest gifts Jesus gave to you, me and to all believers is two-fold. The first is the knowledge that when we suffer as Christians, Jesus has been there first, and is with us throughout the ordeal. The second is that in Christ, our suffering does have meaning, and will be fully vindicated and redeemed by God. How do we know that? We know it because God vindicated Jesus’ suffering on the cross through the glorious victory of the resurrection. That is God’s last word on the power of death and sin to enslave us. We are now free in Christ. On Sunday we talked about discipleship, and how the season of Lent is a great time to get more intentional about our spiritual lives, and deepen our faith and relationship in and with God. We cannot imitate the suffering of Jesus Christ, because that was entirely unique. Jesus died once, for the salvation of all believers and the redemption of the world. However, God’s response to Jesus’ suffering was the resurrection, which forged a new path, and a new bridge to reconciliation. Therefore, our suffering can also be about reconciliation. That is the case when we put aside any thought of enduring suffering for personal gain, but accept suffering as a gift on behalf of others to point the way to God, through our savior, Jesus Christ.

In the history of salvation, we know that the covenant made with Noah and all creation after the

flood was the first hint of God confronting our sins in a new way through the gift of life. In the same way, Peter's reference to Noah and baptism is a reminder of the great history of God's salvation. Just as the flood was a decisive break with the old world and the old way of living; when we enter the waters of baptism, you and I die with Christ, and rise again to new life. In either case, there is no going back. Our transformation is not complete, but it has begun. We have taken the first step, and the Holy Spirit compels us and empowers us to walk on in faith. In the new light and new life of Christ, we begin to see things differently. Perhaps we realize how God has been walking alongside us, even when we did not notice or deliberately chose to ignore the signs. Or we become more aware of God's presence in our daily lives. We are filled with God's peace in the promise of eternal life that lifts all fear of the future. This is where we might begin to reframe the question of suffering from "why does God let this happen?" or "why is this happening to me?" to "how is God helping me through this?" or even, "how is God using my suffering or the suffering in the world for good?" When we take on a Christ-like attitude to suffering, we can trust that God will be with us through it, and that God will redeem our suffering in some or many ways.

The real illusion in life is that we can actually grow and learn without suffering. In a rare medical condition, some children are born without nerve endings or the ability to sense pain. Hansen's disease also affects the nerve endings eliminating the sense of pain. All those afflicted are constantly in danger of serious injury, or even accidental death. Our sensory pain is a warning that protects the body from harm, as much as it is a means to help us grow in endurance and perseverance. In Paul's letter to the Church at Corinth, he tells us that through our own painful experiences we are learning to love and serve others because we are better able to comfort them. Without pain, we could not feel empathy or sympathy, nor could we feel compassion. Without pain, we cannot love as Christ loved us and gave Himself for us. Therefore, suffering as a disciple of Christ Jesus is not about personal gain or some kind of twisted sense of martyrdom, but inasmuch as it is grounded by trust and faith in God, our suffering is as Christ's was and on behalf of others to the glory of His name. Let us all consider how the suffering in your life and mine has helped us to grow in Christ, or to serve one another with more love and compassion than we had before.

Amen.