

Experiencing God in Times of Suffering

Theme

The theme for this gathering is “How can we find hope in the midst of suffering?” How can we live an abundant life in the midst of the suffering that takes place in our lives and in the world? Where is God when we suffer? What does God promise us in times of suffering and loss? What resources has God given us to deal with suffering? How do we comfort one another through crisis, loss, and sorrow?

Life Issue

How can we share hope and God's presence with those who suffer?

Community Building & Opening Question

- Think about a public tragedy that has take place in your lifetime. Where were you when you heard the news? What was your first reaction?
- What has been one of the most helpful things another person has done for you or said to you during a difficult time in your life? Why do you think this was so helpful?

Opening Prayer

Lord, we come to you today with hearts filled with gratitude for the many blessings you have given us. We also come to you asking, “Where do we see you in our suffering world?” Be with us as we talk about the hope your promise brings to us, even in times of deepest suffering. Help us remember that you have first-hand knowledge of suffering and death. When we suffer, quiet our spirits so we can hear your compassionate voice and be open to the comfort you can provide. Help us to be that voice for each other in time of need. Amen.

What does the Bible say?

Romans 8:31-35, 37-39

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.

What do others say?

Many of us have experienced suffering in our lives and have been changed by that experience. A number of years ago Berta and I were expecting our first child with great anticipation and joy. It was a shock when the doctor came out of the delivery room to say that Heather, our daughter, needed to be flown to the University of Minnesota hospital because she appeared to have serious birth defects. She lived three weeks and died after we brought her home.

It was a painful and difficult time in our lives. We asked, "Why, God is this happening to us? Why does this baby have to suffer?" Doubts and questions mingled with the anger and dashed hopes. Yet in the midst of it all there was the presence of family and friends who shared our tears and embraced us with arms and words of comfort and hope.

In the days, weeks, and months that followed, I understood the church community in a new and deeper way. There was awareness of the power of scripture, prayer, and liturgy bringing us into the presence of a loving and caring God. There was also a new sense of how the God "who is with us" is also known through others as they become vessels of God's love and care. God wove new life in us with strong threads of faith and hope in an unexpected way.

Conversations with others reveal that many people feel they have experienced God's presence most fully in the darkest days of their lives. Yet we try to isolate ourselves from suffering because we are afraid of the pain and loss that suffering brings. We forget that we live in an imperfect world where suffering is the norm, a world where it is virtually impossible to find a place where suffering and pain can't reach us. God's promise to us is that God will be with us even when we suffer. As Jesus left the disciples, he promised, "I am with you always, to the

end of the age.”(Matthew 28:20b). Paul reaffirms this promise in Romans 8 when he tells his readers that *nothing* can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. God’s love is unconditional and present in the good times as well as the difficult times of our lives. At first glance, this promise may provide little comfort. How can God truly be with us in our suffering? What does God know of our pain? Jesus, the Incarnation of God, personally experienced suffering. Jesus was betrayed by a close associate and abandoned in his hour of need by his most trusted friends. He was brutally interrogated, publicly beaten and humiliated, then cruelly executed.

Because God has suffered, God understands our pain and wants to bind up our wounds. We are told that Jesus wept at the death of Lazarus; he had compassion for the disenfranchised and he anguished over the plight of Jerusalem. He healed the sick and suffering with his touch. Jesus loved the poorest and weakest, as well as the outcasts of his time. His unconditional love was in and of itself an act of healing for their lives.

How can God be with us today? God is present in the words and actions of those who are conduits for God’s love as we experience pain. God uses each of us to express that love for others as well. God helps us find strength in surprising ways that we can’t imagine. After going through the sudden death of both parents with amazing strength and faith, a woman was asked how she could remain so hopeful in such a tragic situation. She answered simply, “Holy Spirit power.” Jesus promised that God would send God’s Spirit, also called the Comforter to be with us as we journey through life. As this woman claimed that promise, so can we.

Amazingly, God weaves good out of our most painful experiences. As we suffer, we may ask questions and deal with doubts, thereby opening ourselves to hear comforting words from God and from those who surround us as the hands, feet, and face of Christ for us in times of trouble. God turned Good Friday into Easter! If God can do that, how might God weave new life out of the pain and hardships that we experience? The German theologian Jürgen Moltmann expresses this hope as a powerful image; “God weeps with us so that we may someday laugh with him.” (*The Way of Jesus Christ*) God’s faithful promise to be with us as we weep and God’s reversal of the powers of death so that we will someday laugh with God are promises to hang on to, even in the darkest times.

Think About...

- What are the promises that God makes to us in Psalm 23 and Romans 8? What verse or phrase from these readings speaks to you today? How might these words be helpful to someone facing rough times?
- List some of the many ways to bring hope, comfort, and support to others. What do we do when we don’t know what to do?
- The reflection speaks of God’s ability to weave good out of suffering. Being able to realize this often takes time and considerable hindsight. What examples in your life or in the lives of others come to mind for you?
- How is simply listening or being present with those who suffer valuable? What is the impact on the person who is facing difficulty? What about the person who is simply listening or being present?

- Many people suffer in ways that may not be immediately obvious. What can we do to recognize these different “levels” of suffering and bring a word of grace to anyone who is hurting, regardless of the seeming severity of the circumstance?

What’s my response? *Select one or more ideas...*

- Pray for comfort and healing for the members of this small group who, either personally or in their family or close circle of friends, are experiencing difficulty.
- Send someone who needs a word of encouragement and hope a “rainy-day” note or e-mail.
- Pick a phrase from one of the Bible readings for this session. Memorize it or carry it with you as a reminder of God’s presence in the midst of sorrow and calamity.
- Make a list of the many ways you’ve seen hope and comfort in your life and the lives of others and thank God for the way God uses people to comfort us in the face of suffering.

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, we are hurting, our world is hurting. Often we get so distracted by all of the suffering and sorrow in our lives, the lives of those around us, and in the world that we forget your promise to be with us through it all. Thank you for your faithfulness to us each day, but especially in hard times. Please be with anyone in our community who is suffering. Help us to be your instruments of peace for them. Help us share the comfort that comes from knowing you are always with them. We pray in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Reflection written by Luther Dale

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