

FROM VICTIMIZATION TO TRANSFORMATION

Psalm 66: 8-20; 1 Peter 3: 13-22

Have you ever been a victim, a victim of something that happened to you or something that was done to you that traumatized you in some way? How have you moved through it? Well, let me tell you the story of Bjorn Ihler. Bjorn is an activist, an activist for peace and human rights. Through writing, film-making and organizing global events Bjorn promotes peace and human rights. But Bjorn is also a survivor of major trauma. What trauma?

In 2011, Norway suffered the largest mass shooting in its history. Anders Breivik, a right-wing extremist, shot and killed 77 people and injured 329 others in two separate attacks. The first attack was the bombing of a government building in downtown Oslo. Later, Breivik made it onto an island off the mainland where hundreds of youth were attending summer camp. The carnage was everywhere. Breivik was charged with homicide and sentenced to 21 years in prison. Bjorn was in the courtroom the day of the sentencing. He was also a youth counsellor on the island the day Breivik did all the killing.

In his account, Bjorn tells of how everyone had gathered in the main meeting room on the island to hear news of an explosion that had taken place on the mainland earlier in the day. They were also told that staying on the island was the safest place to be. But then when they gathered by the campsite, they heard some popping sounds like firecrackers going off. A man was coming over the hill. A few people went over to greet him. But then the man pulled out a gun and started shooting. Everyone ran. Bjorn had a group of young people with him. They ran in search of a shelter to hide in. While running, they saw fallen bodies. It was a horrific sight! There was panic and screaming everywhere!

At one point they heard a helicopter overhead. They assumed the police had arrived on the island. Someone came over the clearing dressed in a police uniform. Bjorn and the others walked toward him. But then he pulled out a gun and started shooting. It was Breivik! Once again, they ran. They jumped into the lake and tried to swim away. Bjorn stood up in the water to take off a sweater he was wearing, weighing him down. But as he stood up he saw Breivik on the shore aiming his gun straight at him! At that moment, Bjorn describes how he felt: "I was absolutely certain I would die. It was an extraordinary moment which is hard to describe. I felt peace inside me but also this overwhelming emptiness; it was a feeling of my soul leaving my body."

Thankfully, Breivik missed and Bjorn was able to throw himself back in the water. He and the others swam around the side of the lake. Eventually, police arrived and rescued them... When they got back to the campsite, the sight was overwhelming: ambulances everywhere, bodies

covered in blankets, parents screaming for their children... the sounds and images are permanently etched in Bjorn's memory...

OK... 14 years later, today, Bjorn has begun to move on... Somehow, he has found a way to move on... He wouldn't describe himself a victim anymore as he once did. And not only that. What he suffered has become instrumental in the direction his life has taken. Even as life can still be a struggle at times as the memories weigh him down, Bjorn has moved on from living as a victim to someone living a life of transformation. How has this happened to Bjorn?

And we ask this question not just for ourselves as individuals living in isolation. We also ask as those in compassionate solidarity with those in Gaza, Ukraine, those escaping wildfires or overwhelmed by having to rebuild... What revelatory wisdom may our scriptures offer us as a blueprint from victimization to transformation?

Well, the bible talks about two kinds of suffering. Broadly speaking, there is the kind of suffering that happens to us as a consequence of mistakes in our lives. But there is also the kind of suffering where we are totally innocent. Often, suffering is a combination of things. We suffer not only because of our own choices, but the choices of others. Often, things happen to us beyond any of our mistakes. And sometimes, our suffering has nothing to do with what we have done or failed to do. Where is human choice a factor in a war zone, a wildfire, or a pandemic? What about a mass shooting? Certainly, human behaviour plays a part. But it is also true that those who suffer the most are too often those who are least guilty and most vulnerable.

The cross of Jesus is all about forgiveness of sin. But the cross of Jesus is also about God's solidarity with us in our suffering. Somehow, God coming to be with us in our darkest night can make all the difference in how we may find our way to the morning light. How so?

Let's seek out some revelatory wisdom from our scripture readings. Both readings are about the journey from victimization to transformation. But both readings also point to profound suffering. In the case of the psalmist, the language of suffering is metaphorical. It's as if God has given the people a test. It's like polishing the dirt off silver so that it shines. The dirt is described as the kind of suffering where you feel like your caught in a net, with a great big burden on your back. You're flat out and your enemies are riding over your head. It also feels like passing through burning flames or wading through deep water. But whatever the imagery, the key for the psalmist is that they have made it through to the other side. They have enough distance from their suffering to describe it as a test. Thinking of suffering as a test may be an incentive and motive to make it through rather than give up and give in... Whatever it takes.

But there's something else as well. The psalm expresses exuberant gratitude, the kind of gratitude we express after we pass through a huge ordeal and come out on the other side.

We've made it through the burning flames. We've not only stayed afloat in the deep water but made it to shore. We are grateful we've passed the test. But more than that. We're grateful for God's steadfast love. God has accompanied us throughout. God has been there with us in our cross until we have found our way to the beginning of resurrection.

So what would it take to transform the cross of victimization into the resurrection of new life? For the psalmist, first of all, it's about thinking of suffering as a test. Passing it will make you stronger and more resilient in ways you would have never known before. But also, the key to such strength and resilience is that it is marked by gratitude and love. If I'm full of bitterness, resentment and revenge in my cry for justice, I am still a victim of the suffering. To redeem the suffering somehow I need to be brought into a fullness of love and peace in my soul. I need to be able to shed tears - tears of grief that in time also become tears of gratitude.

And what about our New Testament reading from 1 Peter? Here too, Peter frames a journey from cross to resurrection, from victimization to transformation. The key is in how we pass through the suffering and what we receive on the other side we didn't have before. Suffering is something to be resisted for sure. Injustice must be called out and those committing it need to be held accountable. But how do we pass through suffering in the depths of our hearts? That's where the long journey is critical.

The apostle Peter speaks of being ready to make a defence but doing so "with gentleness and reverence." In other words, we need the kind of inspiration and love in our hearts where we stand up for justice in ways that treat others with integrity and respect no matter what they've done. We are not drawn into the vortex of vengeance and retaliation. The key, he says, is to rise up with a 'good conscience.' We don't want to carry any regret or negativity in our hearts going forward. The imagery he uses is that of Noah in the ark passing through the flood waters, and even the imagery of baptism as passing through the waters and rising up to new life. He also refers to Christ on the cross, carrying the injustices of us all and the suffering of all victims of injustice. As Christ rises into new life, so are we rising into new life with him.

OK, preacher, some wonderful imagery here. But what does that look like in real life? How is suffering redeemed? How is our victimization transformed into a new kind of life where the sting of victimization no longer imprisons and poisons our hearts?

Let's get back to Bjorn. 14 years after the horrific trauma of a mass shooting he barely survived, Bjorn has experienced transformation. He feels badly for all those who still carry their victimization with them. For them, Breivik still has a hold over them. It's like they're scared to even say his name. They've just not been able to move on. For Bjorn, though, the focus has become larger than one person. He's come to see that behind Breivik and white extremism is the social reality of racism and violence which is a problem for Norway and all of society. The problem of misogyny and LGBTQI+ hatred and toxic masculinity is also part of the same

network of social realities. Breivik is not just one man. He was created by the flaws in a society that marginalizes and oppresses those who are not acceptable to those who dominate and hold power. There's a whole history and we're all complicit and complacent as a society.

Before the trauma, Bjorn not only lacked awareness of the larger ills of society. He lived a fairly self-enclosed life. He was positive, but complacent. His life lacked the urgency for change. Now, his whole life is given over to promoting peace and human rights. He is on a transformation journey and the resurrection for him is the kind of life much richer than any life he had before, even though he's now lived through something horrific.

And Bjorn's example, I believe, is not only a practical illustration of the journey our scriptures are challenging us to undergo. No. It's also an inspiration for us as we ponder what we are living here and now. How will we redeem the terrible loss of lives in the face of a mass shooting, daily images of people starving to death in Gaza or the rubble of bombs falling on Ukraine? How will we redeem massive disastrous weather events like fires and floods which are only getting more extreme with our climate crisis? Unless we see the bigger picture behind these individual events and engage them constructively, we will miss the opportunity for transformation. Are we to remain simply as victims of violent misogyny, racism, homophobia and transphobia? Are we to remain complacent about the vulnerabilities in our society exposed by our attachment to lifestyles unsustainable for our planet? Or will our suffering and the suffering of the most vulnerable become a wake-up call to personal resurrection and transformation?

Each of us are being given this time to think seriously and deeply, to open our hearts to where the suffering is around us as much as in us, with a capacity to make choices beyond our apathy or helplessness. God has called us to a resurrection kind of life. Let us not settle for remaining victims of what is and what will come to be over and over again unless we make the changes we are capable of making for ourselves even as we cannot control larger decisions of governments, corporations and dictators. Where do you and I need to make changes in our personal lives?

May we come with the Psalmist to seeing what we're undergoing as a test, and as an opportunity to emerge with a new kind of gratitude and fullness of love as we take some courageous steps in our lives. May we come with the apostle Peter to experience a new kind of peace with a good conscience because we are living as we are called to live, not settling for less because it's easier and more comfortable. God's grace surrounds us for all our vulnerable humanity and fear. But our crucified, risen Lord challenges us to rise up to a humanity that is in us yet to become ever more fully, whether we are 9 years old or 90 years old and everything in-between.

Let us pray: We are here, O God... each of us in our own way... Don't give up on us... but don't let us off the hook either... sustain us when we fail and fall, O God, which is often enough... But inspire us also, and empower us with courage, to settle for nothing less than ever greater transformation, knowing we are loved infinitely whatever comes... Amen.