

Suffering sits near the center of our readings today.

Isaiah is calling to those who spend their money “for that which is not bread, [their] labor for that which does not satisfy” - their hunger and thirst persist. The Psalmist “thirsts” for God, and their flesh faints for God. It’s a desperate need for God that implies absence - the absence of God. “My whole being clings to you,” it reads, as though God’s presence were somehow only momentary.

Paul tells the Corinthians of the Israelites, led by Moses - about their great suffering in Egypt, their suffering in the wilderness after being led to freedom, and their eventual turn away from God, to an idol. Paul sees the Corinthians feeling similarly “Tested”, and tells them, “No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone”. Everyone is suffering, he tells them.

And finally, In our Gospel lesson, Jesus encounters some folks who have seen some violent suffering: Jesus speaks of two terrible, recent instances of suffering - the eighteen killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them, and these Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices.

These readings square our shoulders and focus our gaze on suffering, sitting in our way.

It's the season of Lent - A hard path to follow, and a still harder destination: The cross and the death of Jesus. In this way suffering is "in the air" of the season - present, but as yet a little out of focus. Lent, then, is not entirely unlike our experience of life itself - with suffering coming into and out of focus. This helps me be grateful then for the honesty of Lent - that walking this path, following Jesus to his end, we are put face to face with the realities of life we might not otherwise seek to face. But face them we will, whether in Lent or in life. Today we look at one such reality - suffering.

Whatever the cause or circumstance or "kind", suffering raises big questions - you might call them "God sized" questions. And in the face of suffering, it's not just Christians who get to wondering. All people, when they encounter suffering (in their lives or the lives of others) look to the heaven's and ask one question in particular - "Why?"

That's the question these Corinthians are asking - "Why are we suffering? Isn't God on our side because of Jesus?" Did this question of "why" also occur to the Psalmist? The Psalms (in general) are filled with language that make me think not. But this Psalm takes a tone that reminds me of people you might consider disingenuous - as though they were simply trying to stay on God's "good side", perhaps in an attempt to avoid suffering.

That. That's a particular kind of logic - about God and about suffering. It's a particular kind of logic that grows in the face of suffering.

You know what I'm talking about | because you've heard it before. Maybe it's even been your own logic at times. In the absence of clear answers about why we suffer (despite ourselves or even our faith), we come up with rational/calculated explanations for it. And the answer that comes most often (to non-church goers and church goers alike) is that **suffering | is God's punishment for sin.**

This answer to why there is suffering in the world is close at hand in this culture of ours, and for at least one reason: It's a clear reflection of the world we live in - a world of one-to-one correspondence, "tit for tat." If you killed somebody, you'll either go jail | or we'll kill you back. It's an eye-for-an-eye logic. Rational and precise. Jesus spoke of it himself, revealing just how old this logic must be.

Hearing these terrible accounts of people meeting their end, Jesus sees this logic turning in these people and calls it out: "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ...Or these 18 who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them - do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?" Answering his own question, he tells them: "No"

Jesus is saying, NO - these people did not suffer and die because of their sin. God does not punish people according to their sin - that is the world's logic, NOT GOD's!! And as if in response, our question lights up again in bright, neon, block letters: "Then WHY?!" Why do people suffer?

Jesus tells a parable. This one is of a fig tree. There is a farmer clearly beholden to the logic of the world - "This tree has not produced any fruit, ever" he tells the gardener. "Cut it down!" Tit for tat. Rational and precise. It seems clear enough to the gardener, though, that it's not producing because it's using all its energy merely to survive - this tree is suffering in adverse conditions and seeks simply to endure. So the gardener pleads: Give it another year. I'll till the soil underneath and treat it with some nutrient rich manure. It just needs a little attention.

Speaking of the Galileans and the 18 under the tower of Siloam, Jesus brings Lent back into focus for us, with the word. "Repent."

"Repent" literally means "turn around", "turn back". It's a useful word on this Lenten path. We are "prone to wander" after all. Especially when the path of Lent begs us to examine our questions, assumptions and the reality of suffering - the suffering in our lives, the lives of loved ones, and in the life of the world. Truly, we would rather simply turn away from it. But Jesus says "Repent", and our eyes and feet are drawn back to the path from whence we've wandered, back in the direction Jesus goes. But when Jesus says "repent", and follows it here with this parable, what is he saying?

Well, what is repentance beyond the literal translation of "turn around" and "turn back?" It's an invitation - an invitation to attention, to attend, to care.

Jesus sees these people, absorbed in figuring out the “why” of suffering. He sees them working out a logic that makes sense to them. He sees them seeking to control their own outcomes - learning how it is they might avoid such suffering themselves. Jesus sees them chalking it up to behavior - sin. “These fools suffered for what they did, because of their sin.” We see what Jesus sees; the way their logic has divorced them from right relationship with God and with their suffering neighbor.

Jesus is telling these folks “Forget working out ‘why’ people suffer - this will only lead you astray. Simply pay attention! Pay attention to the corrupt depravity of Pilot who not only killed these Galileans but desecrated their offering to God! Attend to their grieving families, care for the loved ones they left behind! Pay attention to the needlessness and injustice of their suffering! To say it plain, “Don’t try to avoid suffering - repent: go right towards it; pay attention to suffering.”

This is the repentance of the gardener who seeks the well being of this fig tree rather than the profit margin of the farmer. The gardener pays attention, and in that attending, sees that the soil is dry and in need of help. He cares enough to attend to this poor, suffering tree rather than focus on the healthy ones producing just fine.

This attention to the suffering is the attention Jesus is leading us to | when he says “repent”. Turn back to this path, in all its discomfort and the pain to which you will bear witness before this is all over. For on this path, you will find life. On this path you will find God (though hidden), gazing back in the face of the suffering.

My friends, this is our Christian calling.

In baptism - our entrance into the body of Christ in the world, the sign of God's belovedness and claim over our lives - we are sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. This "Cross" - this symbol of ultimate suffering (including abandonment, humiliation, defeat, pain, and death) - becomes our symbol of God's overcoming of all suffering | through the raising of Christ from the dead. Marked with the Cross in baptism, as in Lent, means we need not fear suffering or death ever again. And fearing death no longer, we are freed to march right toward death and attend to the suffering we meet along the way.

This is the witness of the gardener. This is the destination of the path of Lent. This attention is the loving, unwavering attention of God to the suffering - including you. All that you suffer and all the suffering you see in the world, God sees it too and is present (though hidden) in all of it. Repentance is God's invitation to you. For at the end of this Lenten path, the resurrection of Jesus will only be less joyous, less luminous, less meaningful, less understood, the less we attend to all that resurrection has overcome.

So let us repent, in the name of Jesus; to follow again the path he leads us down - a path that leads us face to face with suffering and a savior who shows us how to attend.

AMEN

Attention is the key... Isaiah 55:3, Psalm 63:6

Opposite of attention... idolatry? 1 Cor.

But must attention always signal strenuousness? Simone Weil, the French philosopher and social theorist, doesn't think so. She's convinced there's a more beautiful form of attending to someone than just displaying tense concentration. "To attend means not to seek, but to wait; not to concentrate, but instead to dilate our minds." When it comes to one's own attention, Weil suggests a receptive disposition that's more reflective than aggressive, more standing still than strenuous.

Weil's concept of attending to others receptively involves recognizing the full humanity of especially those who suffer. For her, this means more than just assigning afflicted individuals to "a specimen in the social category labeled *unfortunate*." Staring at other people and merely thinking about them is no way to attend to them. "The love of our neighbor in all its fullness," she writes, "means being able to say to him, 'What are you going through?'" *and to hear it, and hold it.*

Peter Marty | March 11, 2022

**The gardener's word translated "let it alone" is also the root word from which we get "forgiveness."** It appears two chapters earlier, in Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer (11:4).

The kind of judgment we are quick to use in other people's situations, based on some ledger of fairness, does not reflect God's logic... But the servant, whose hope is based on the time and attention he can give the tree, asks for forgiveness—for the time and space to try. He'll treat it as though it is one of the thriving trees, watering it and fertilizing the soil. ...Forgiveness in this parable is letting go, leaving something alone—in the interest of radical transformation.

by **Mihee Kim-Kort** February 22, 2022