*Sermon Text for February 9, 2014*

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Isaiah 53:1-9, John 19:1-7

“Were you there?”

How many of you have been watching the Olympics? Of course for us it holds some special allure because we were there, well, not actually at Sochi, but in Russia. So all the complaints about the wild dogs, they roamed the streets of Moscow, one pack was right by our house, making sure that the toilet paper doesn’t get flushed down the toilet, but rater put in a waste paper basket. That was common place. Every restaurant, hotel, or wherever you went you just knew that toilet paper doesn’t go in the toilet, right? The next thing the people will want is room controlled thermostats for the heat. Our apartment in Russia we had no control over the heat, we had to open the windows in the summer to get the cold air in because it was so hot in that apartment. It was all centrally controlled. So these things that people are amazed by in a developed country like Russia, it really is no big deal if you’ve been there. Once you are there, it all makes sense.

We have been following the Gospel of John and we are coming to an end. Normally these Scriptures would be read for Lent, but we are almost done. On preschool Sunday we will be bringing the Gospel of John to a close. We have been there making our way through the Gospel.

This past week we buried Lloyd Welk, and I need to tell you I have never seen kids more brave and more together than his. How they were able to give a eulogy and keep it together, or sing a song for their dad and keep it together, was impressive. It would be in those times that you would think the raw emotions of why did this have to happen would come out, but instead, the very confident assurance that God is in control of even this situation astounded me.

In our Scriptures today we find described Jesus’ suffering and we see how he does not shake his fist at God and ask Why?, but rather is able to put it within the context of the Providence of God, be able to accept it and move forward in that understanding. That’s what I saw at Lloyd’s service. Grief was apparent, but there was no questioning of suffering and tragedy and how does it fit in our understanding of God and God’s ability to control all that is around us.

I wonder if those who spend their lives at the mercy of God tending the earth and God’s creations, if farmers, or those who every single day of their lives know that what happens today is beyond their control but is rather under the watchful eye of the Creator, if that is not the way in which we ought to approach life in general. When tragedy strikes, it still hurts, but we are able to say: “We were there when…” and put it within the context of lessons learned that point to God being in control and not us. Today we are going to ask the question, were you there? Are we able to see what happens around us as ultimately having as its purpose God’s design, or do we spend our lives trying to wrest control from God? Let’s read and see.

In our Old Testament reading today Isaiah speaks of the suffering that Jesus went through. Listen to how he describes it: he was despised, rejected, a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity. The reason that Isaiah gives us for the suffering of Christ the Messiah is that he himself has borne our infirmities, carried our diseases, has been wounded for our sins, crushed for our sins, bruised so that we might be healed.

From Isaiah we hear that the suffering of the Messiah is so that we as a people can be healed, made whole and our sins washed clean. This Old Testament reading was written hundreds of years before Christ came along. Hundreds of years before John recorded what he saw and what we read today in chapter 19. But Isaiah is writing it as if he were there. He is writing it as if he knew these things were going to happen. The power of Scripture never ceases to amaze me and the opportunity that we have to be able to be led and guided by Scripture should never be underestimated.

Jesus was taken, stripped of his clothes, scourged by a steel tipped whip so that his flesh would be taken off his body, sharp jagged thorns were pressed upon his head, he was struck time and time again in the head, face, and body by fists and kicks. He was humiliated by insults and jeers and was spat upon.

Now this is all very normal, even an everyday occurrence for those who are about to be killed by crucifixion. See when one is nailed to a cross none of the primary organs are damaged so to speed up the death process the prisoners were beaten to a pulp, practically killed before being hung on a cross. I don’t know about you but it pains me to think of Jesus having to go through what he went through. The question why keeps popping up in my mind. In fact some theologians are so disturbed by a bloodied and suffering Christ that they want to get rid of that image all-together. It bothers me, but I think it is supposed to, I think we need to be bothered, and upset when we read this passage it inevitably leads us to ask the question why? Why did Jesus have to go through this? We need to let the suffering of Jesus bother us.

It is hard to understand the purpose of Christ’s suffering. The truth of Christ’s suffering is that God suffers because God loves. Throughout the Bible we find God suffering. This is not the first time. And it is not the first time that God suffers because of our actions. We see it in Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Moses and the wilderness. Today we read about the suffering of God’s son literally at our hands as they whipped, beat, and mocked Him.

Theologians have come up with reasons as to why God puts up with us and continues to suffer on account of us. Thomas Aquinas stated that Christ’s suffering was God’s instrument of choice for our salvation. This is very similar to what Isaiah states, by his wounds and bruises we are healed. The way to salvation has to stop and pass by the cross. This is the reality but also the necessity of Christ’s suffering.

But all throughout this suffering we would be mistaken to consider Christ a victim. A victim is one who is powerless as they suffer at the hands of someone else. Christ, instead, was in control, almost directing his passion step by step. He realized during all of this that salvation is a process and part of that process is suffering and even death.

When I was serving in Jacksonville one day I was visiting with people in the church when a friend stopped by the church and said that his 18 foot sailing boat had capsized and all but sunk right outside of my office. Could I help. Well I know as much about boats as I do about hunting deer so I called a member of the church who was a sailor, and we went out there and assured the man that no we don’t need a professional to right the boat and with a little bit of patience and a lot of hard work it could be done.

I was amazed that if a boat just about completely under water is brought close enough to shore it will all but come up by itself. This is only if you take the time to bring it in slowly. The boat righted itself and the men spent the next half hour debating what the best way to get the water out of the boat: to pump or not to pump, to turn it on its side. The member of the church was a very soft spoken man, and in his quiet way said it’s amazing what a man and a five-gallon bucket can get accomplished if he puts his mind to it. Well they tried everything to get the water out and their last recourse was as the member said to bail the water out by hand, but he knew that. And after a bit of time and a lot of slow, patient, tedious, and yes hard work those men got that sail boat just about cleared of the water.

There was only one way for humanity, you and I, to be saved and given a new life. It wasn’t an easy way. It wasn’t a painless way. It was the way that led to the cross. Only through the painful, tedious, torturous Via Dolorosa are we able to participate in the Via Vittoriosa. What emotion wells up within you when you realize that God actually suffered for our sake, that Jesus actually was tortured so that we might have life. Does the recognition of Christ’s suffering create a tremendous sense of humility within us?

We are in danger of forgetting why Christ suffered and therefore why his suffering is so important. In Italy I was very strongly opposed to the crucifix, you know the cross with Jesus hanging on it dying and bleeding. I didn’t feel comfortable with the guilt that it portrayed. Almost as if Christ were looking down from the cross saying: Look what you did to me. But our society needs a little more guilt. Because suffering and guilt produce humility, and it is exactly this humility that Christ calls us to have.

Today our children are not taught humility but rather the importance of self-esteem. We do not hear the word sin preached from our pulpits or talked about by our religious leaders but rather morality and ethics. When we forget why Christ suffered we are in danger of losing our humility before God. When we lose our humility then we fail to realize that we are sinners. Today I call us back to humility- to the recognition that Christ suffered for me and for you. It is only trough his suffering that we have life. It was through Christ’s suffering that humanity was given a chance to right itself. Like the submerged sailing vessel there are no quick fixes to our sinful state. Only the gradual, consistent and painful suffering of Christ was able to right humanity.

Today as we ordain and install leaders in our congregation we hand over to them the mantle of servanthood. They are to lead by example. They are to lead as humble servants, as we are all called to lead.

Let us recognize our sin before Christ today and live as Christ’s humbles servants indebted to Christ’s suffering. Amen.