

Sermon Text for March 26, 2017

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Exodus 17:3-7, Romans 5:1-5

“Where is God when it hurts?”

On Wednesday at noon we have our Lenten services and I preached on this very same Scripture. I told the people who were there on Wednesday that they still had to come to church on Sunday, and so I want to give them their Sunday’s worth. There will be some similarities to what I said on Wednesday, the main gist of the sermon is the same, but this is such an important concept for us this Lenten season that I have to cover it again.

I know that many of you have heard this story before because I have said it before here. But it so fits into what I’m going to share with you, and we don’t remember things past 3 or 4 years anyway. The first time that I ever spoke in a setting where there were many, many other people from different Christian denominations around. It was my first year as an ordained pastor, 1994, I was invited to lead off the yearly ecumenical gathering in the San Ciro Cathedral in Portici, Italy. Our orphanage that we helped run and where we lived was in that same town. I noticed as we were sitting around getting ready to start, and I was the first who was supposed to speak, I noticed that the microphone when they tested it was not working properly. Let me test you, if I were to say to you: The Lord be with you, how would you respond? And also with you. Right? Well, I wanted to remedy that situation so I went up to microphone thinking that I would solve this before we got started and said: There’s Something wrong with this thing. And also with you. Isn’t that what Lent is all about. Rediscovering in a friendly, safe environment that there is something wrong with us. Let’s read a Scripture from the Apostle Paul where he addresses where is God in the midst of our suffering, where is God when that sin which we commit comes home to roost.

READ SCRIPTURE

The terror attack in London this past week serves as a stark reminder that we live in a world where at any moment something terrible can happen across the globe. We find ourselves in a world where there is a civil war taking place in Syria, political dissidents are being gunned down in Ukraine, the same country where there is a danger of a nuclear holocaust. We live in a world where North Korea could start at any moment a war which would involve China and the US. Peru has lost lives with their flooding, With all the

world events that are happening today I have plenty of material for my sermons. The suffering of humanity this Lenten season is palpable, tangible, very evident this year.

Philip Yancey wrote a book called, just like the sermon title: “Where is God when it hurts?” In this book he states that Jesus in his ministry never dealt with the question of cause, meaning whose fault is it or who has caused this. Even though that is usually the question that we want answered first and foremost. We want to know why this is happening to me, why are you doing this to me, O God. When horrible things happen we need someone to blame. That is our first concern. But Jesus says it is not important who has caused the suffering, but rather to what end, what is the purpose, what will be the end result of this suffering?

Isn't this the question the people of Israel are asking Moses? Where is God in the suffering as we wander through the desert. They also eventually turn on Moses as well. He is to blame for all that has taken place. It would have been better if we had stayed as slaves. The Israelites of the Old Testament are masters at casting the blame, of asking where is God in the midst of this, because he is to blame after all and forgetting the real question of to what end will my suffering be, how will I grow, how will God be glorified in my suffering.

You know, in the Gospel of John, Jesus doesn't blame the Samaritan woman at the well for anything that she may have done or not done. He doesn't condemn her for the five husbands which she has. She doesn't call her a bad woman or belittle her. Rather, he turns her in to the first foreign evangelist. Just like St. Patrick was an immigrant and brought the Gospel to Ireland, I had to throw in there a St. Patrick Day's reference, so this Samaritan woman was the first foreigner tasked with spreading the Gospel.

We find this tendency repeated by Jesus all throughout the Gospel. In the Gospel of John chapter 9 the man born blind is not the cause of his blindness, his parents are not the cause, in fact Jesus refuses to answer the question that his disciples want him to answer: whose fault is it? Instead Jesus answers not by saying who, but rather what the end result of this suffering will be, and that is that God will be glorified. Suffering in Scripture, just like suffering in our lives is not a litmus test as to who is good or bad. We want to make it that. We want to know who is to blame when terrorists strike. And It is important to find that out, but when we live in fear because of the terrorists we lose sight of the potential purpose of the attack which is able to bring us closer together in standing against violence and terrorism. Suffering merely exists as proof of our fallen state. It is

not a result of our individual worthiness or lack of being worthy. The perfect example is that of Job. Job was righteous and the message of Job has nothing to do with who caused his suffering but rather his ability to keep the faith in the midst of his suffering.

This is an important distinction. When we ask the question where is God when it hurts sometimes we also ask the question, what did I do wrong to deserve this? When we face tragedy and dreams that are shattered in pieces which we think we can never pick up, we can find ourselves paralyzed by the question who is to blame and so then in turn we don't live our lives as testimonies of initiative and hard work.

Ange Michou

Rabbi Kushner wrote a book called When bad things happen to good people and he says about Job: Faith like Job's cannot be shaken because it is the result of having been shaken. Our faith needs to be that same kind of battle tested faith which is strengthened through the fire of our lives. What we find out, and what Paul alludes to in Romans is that faith in God does not offer any type of insurance against tragedy.

Did you know that Christians have the same mortality rate as non-Christians and that is 100%. Many cultures, ours included, see prosperity and basic lack of tribulation and trials as a sign of God's blessing. God is present when you are doing well. The converse might then be true, God is not present when you are suffering. You know, this couldn't be further from the truth. It is those who suffer and hurt who have a greater appreciation and understanding of who God is.

There was a Gallup poll some years back that tried to measure the spirituality index of people and find what section of society spent the most time in prayer, in church, reading Scripture, discipling, etc. They found that it wasn't pastors, elders, or deacons. The grandmothers who were left with the raising of their grandchildren all by themselves, because the parents had left or couldn't be bothered. These usually single grandmothers, who probably suffer the most in society, the ones who could be the most bitter, were the ones who spent the most time in fellowship with God.

Paul states in Romans that we are to boast in our sufferings. Because suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope. Don't take my word for it, but think of Paul. In a damp, dark prison, leading a group sought after to be killed if found. Paul who knew suffering and was experiencing it first hand even as he writes, does not despair, he boasted. Because it provides him with another opportunity to see the great comforter, the Holy Spirit, pour God's love directly into our hearts when our hearts are about to be drained, broken, shattered.

Now, I know you. You are like me. We live in Strasburg and some would say our comfort can be maximum and our suffering minimum. We haven't experienced the life of Ange Michou. But we have all had times when a brother is missing, a father has Alzheimers, a child dies, our finances are shot, and you can fill in the blank. Hear me well. I am not saying that we should seek our own suffering, but I am saying that this Lenten season if God is most present with those who are suffering then we need to seek them out. Get out of our walls and into the community. We need to be where they are not for their sake, but also, maybe even especially, for ours so we can also see the living face of God. The reason I think it is so important for our youth to have mission trips is so that they are able to ministered to by those whom they serve far away. We think we are sending them to serve, but in reality they are the ones who will be served the most.

We have a few more weeks of lent left. Look for ways to serve in this church. We have a children's program that is exploding, it absolutely is. But the only way we can maintain the momentum is by each one of us getting involved. When you hurt the most if you are able to reach out in help to others you will be able to see the face of God even more clearly.

Paul does not tell us who causes our suffering. We know that we live in the world and are subject to the laws of nature. When a baby dies the parents ask why did God do this? Was it God who did this? We do not know. Is God present as the couple questions, is angry, despairs, mourns. Absolutely. Jesus Christ as he suffered and died upon the cross, suffered this separation from God suffered like no one else. Yet he knew that when he was gone he would send the great comforter, the Holy Spirit to accompany us on our life's journey of joy and sorrow.

Paul tells us here today in Romans that suffering does produce results that can strengthen us. Suffering produces endurance, for those who trust, endurance produces character for those with faith, character produces hope where before there was only despair.

We are commanded not to accept suffering as the inevitable consequences of our lives. We must battle suffering with all that we have, here in the community and in the world as well. We are not to lay back and let it have its own way. Jesus' life was one of combating suffering as a sign of this kingdom that was to come. But in the midst of this battle we ought to boast because Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with God's love that will envelop us as the comforter embraces us in God's love.

May God bless you and keep you during this season of Lent.