

“The Hard Questions of Lent: 5) Why Is There So Much Suffering in the World?”

a sermon by

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Text: “And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen and establish you” (I Peter 5:10).

Several months ago Emilio Estevez produced a movie based on the life of Robert Kennedy, which he entitled “Bobby.” The movie chronicles the events in the life of Bobby Kennedy after his brother, President John F. Kennedy, was assassinated by Lee Harvey Oswald in Dallas, Texas, in 1963. David Brooks, writing in the *New York Times*, points out that in the months following the death of the President, Bobby Kennedy was devoured by grief. As one of his biographers noted, “He lost so much weight that he literally shrank, until he appeared wasted and gaunt. His clothes no longer fit, especially his brother’s old clothes-- an old blue topcoat, a tuxedo, and leather bombing jacket that he insisted on wearing.”

But during March, 1964, something happened that changed Robert Kennedy’s life. While on vacation in Antigua, he read a book that was given to him by his sister-in-law, Jackie Kennedy. The book was entitled *The Greek Way* and was written by a classical scholar, Edith Hamilton. The book pointed Kennedy to the great tragedians of the Greek civilization, Aeschylus and Sophocles. In them he found a key to understanding the tragic dimension of life. Kennedy

read the book over and over again, underlined key passages, and quoted it wherever he went. He memorized a passage from Aeschylus, which he often quoted,

“God, whose law it is that he who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep pain that cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despite, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.”

I.

One of the hard questions of Lent is the question, “Why is there so much suffering in the world?” It certainly is a haunting question today. There is a great deal of human suffering in our world: in Dafur and the Sudan, in the aftermath of Tsunamis and Hurricanes, in the war ravaged area of Iraq and Afghanistan.

But the issue is close to all of us. This week Elizabeth Edwards announced the recurrence of her bout with breast cancer, as she joins thousands of others in this country who battle the insidious effects of cancer. There is no group that is immune from this. It strikes the old, the young, and those in between.

The Bible has a great deal to say about the issue of human suffering. The Book of Job, certainly one of the great books of the Old Testament, deals with the question of why the innocent suffer. Job, over against his friends, argues that his suffering is not the result of his sin. He maintains his claim of innocence in spite of the conventional wisdom of his day that held that all suffering was the result of sin.

Jesus devoted himself on a number of occasions to the question of human suffering. In John’s gospel, when confronted with a man born blind and the question, “Who sinned this man or his parents that he was born blind?” Jesus replied by saying, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” (John 9: 1-12). On another occasion when a tower in Jerusalem fell and killed eighteen men, Jesus maintained that these men were not killed because they were evil (Luke 13:4ff.).

The Apostle Paul, in words that are hauntingly similar to those of the Greek poets, observed in his letter to the Church at Rome, that “Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Romans 5:3-5).

II.

One of the books of the New Testament that takes up the theme of suffering is I Peter, one of the so-called “Catholic Epistles.” The letter is attributed to the Apostle Peter, but it reflects a much later time when the church was suffering the persecution of the Roman Empire. The letter is addressed to the churches of Asia Minor and is a word of encouragement to those who are suffering in the name of Christ. In this letter the author of I Peter reminds his readers that just as Christ was misunderstood and suffered unjustly for the sake of others, so Christians

are now called to follow in his steps. In this small, but critically important letter, there are two themes that deserved our consideration this morning.

The first is a witness to the power of God's grace at work in the midst of human suffering. The author of I Peter puts it like this: "And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you." (I Peter 5:10) The Christian witness is that the last word in every human situation is the grace of God. God's grace is not only forgiveness and renewal but it is, as Reinhold Niebuhr once said, "God's providential working in history by which he makes the wrath of man to praise him and transmutes good out of evil." The human situation may become difficult, but there is always hope.

There is nothing more important in the Christian spirit than awareness that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. Faith in God's providence is simply another aspect of the awareness that God is personal, an awareness which lies at the very heart of our faith. This confidence of God's grace in our lives is not the reflection of human experience. In fact, it is often contrary to human experience. It is found in our experience of God's grace in Jesus Christ. It is our experience with Jesus Christ that gives us the personal ability to face any experience with the confidences that "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ." In the words of the hymn, "Amazing Grace"

"Through many dangers, toils, and snares
I have already come;
Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home."

The second theme that is found in I Peter is the example of the suffering of Jesus. I Peter put it like this: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed."

Paul Tillich once observed that the painting of the *Crucifixion* by Matthias Grunewald was the greatest portrayal of the incarnation in visual art. The basis for this judgment is the sheer horror of the dead body upon the cross and the obvious anguish of those who stood at the foot of the cross. It puts in visual form the question, "Can this man be the Son of God?"

The Lenten Season always points us to Easter and Easter always reminds us of the power of God to raise Jesus Christ from the dead, demonstrating in human history that there are resources of divine mercy and power that can take the broken, wounded pieces of life and put them together again.

That is our hope in the face of suffering and it is a hope that will not fail.
Amen!