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First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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Questions Every Christian Asks 6. What About Suffering?

Psalm 116:15 CEB The death of the Lord's faithful is a costly loss in his eyes.

John 11:32-35 NRSV When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." 33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. 34 He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." 35 Jesus began to weep.

Our children sang it with such energy this morning, "Hosanna!" The crowds in Andrew Lloyd Weber's musical, "Jesus Christ Superstar" (which I listen to every Holy Week for the power of its portrayal) sing it with glee and gusto as they greet Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. [\[PLAY\]](#) The contemporary Christian group "Hillsong" has a powerful version that has been widely sung in the last decade. [\[PLAY\]](#) One of the Vineyard network of churches' often-sung songs is this version of "Hosanna." [\[PLAY\]](#) And contemporary choral composer Dan Forrest brings a new interpretation to this old word. [\[PLAY\]](#) It is the word of the day, of course, on this Palm Sunday when we remember Jesus' triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem, at the beginning of what we now call Holy Week, one of the few stories to be found in all four of the gospels. Here is how the Gospel of John, the last gospel written, tells the story: *"...the great crowd that had come for the [Passover] festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the king of Israel!'"* Hosanna. Hosanna!

But what does the word mean, and what might that word and the story of Palm Sunday have to do with the topic "What About Suffering?", in this, the latest in our sermon series on "Questions Every Christian Asks." Just this: we usually think of the word "Hosanna" as only an exultation, a word of praise, but in Jesus' day it meant so

much more than this. Rev. Caroline Hamilton-Arnold says this, in a powerful prayer she wrote earlier this week:

Those many years ago, the people along the roads shouted, “Hosanna” - **a mingling of delight and desperation**. “Hosanna,” which means “save us,” and is even still a word of praise. “Hosanna,” a cry of longing for liberation and an acclamation of [God’s] steadfast mercy.¹

“...a mingling of delight and desperation.” Life is too often like that, isn’t it? And those words ring oh-so-poignantly true this week as we have seen with horror babies gassed to death in their cribs in Syria, and we perhaps wonder once again, whatever our politics, how can we possibly understand suffering in relation to the God whom we worship and the Christ whom we follow? And in our own lives, each of us in this sanctuary has known those days, those weeks, those years where “delight and desperation” were all mixed up together, and sometimes, it seems the desperation of suffering would snuff out any delight. Where is God in the midst of suffering? What about, as our sermon title has it, suffering? What shall we say?

While this could be the topic for a year’s study, over two millennia there have often been three answers to that question, none of which I think is finally adequate. The first is this: God sends us suffering in order to “test” us. You’ve seen that, you’ve heard that. It’s the sentiment behind Facebook postings and memes like: “God never sends us more than we can handle.” Or this one: “Sometimes God pushes us to our limits... He tests us beyond our endurance because He has greater faith in us than we have in ourselves!”² Or another: “When you are going through something hard and wonder where God is, remember the teacher is always quiet during a test.”³ Or yet one

¹<https://twitter.com/WKofCompassion/status/849724648967159808> Emphasis mine.

²<https://christiansascent.wordpress.com/2016/01/23/why-does-god-test-us/>

³<https://www.pinterest.com/ahart1027/faith/>

more: “We all get tested to see if God is first in our lives.”⁴ You’ve heard these sorts of things, right? They are usually offered by well-intentioned people in the midst of someone’s suffering and while I don’t doubt their good intentions, if you follow the logic that suffering occurs because it has been caused by God and that God has specifically selected someone to inflict suffering upon in order to “test” them, then you end up not with a God of love but a god of arbitrary awfulness whom you will want to avoid instead of worship. I will never forget the woman who said, in the face of someone offering one of these statements after her child died, “If only I hadn’t been so strong, maybe God would have let my child live.”

Do we really want to go there? What possible moral or spiritual good is achieved by God deciding to kill Syrian babies in a horrific fashion? What test has been accomplished? Let me share with you again the rule I have offered: If you wouldn’t say it about a human parent and call it good, you should never say it about God.” A human father who hurt his children intentionally to “test” their faith in him would not be called worthy of admiration but of abomination. Why would we ever say something like that about our God?

There’s a second response to suffering that has been made down through the ages and it is this: Suffering is not really real, it is an illusion. Such a view got its start in the earliest days of Christianity when some wanted to say that Jesus wasn’t “really” human and therefore didn’t “really” suffer, but only pretended to. A close cousin of this point of view is to say that the sufferings we endure now are of no consequence when compared to the eternal life to come. Again, these things are often said by well-intentioned people who are looking to offer comfort, but, once again, the logic of the things they are saying is not comforting at all, and, what’s more, too often helps rationalize ignoring the suffering that is before us. You simply cannot watch your sick

⁴<http://elevateyourfaith.com/elevateyourfaith/overcome-fear-and-doubt-pass-gods-test/>

child and be comforted by thinking that his or her suffering is unreal. And it takes a special kind of jadedness to see homeless women with their children and think that it's okay because their suffering isn't really real and, anyway, eternal life will be better. Saying such things coarsens us, desensitizes us, makes us less able to hear Jesus' plea to us, and more able to ignore the Apostle James when he wrote *"What if one of you said, 'Go in peace! Stay warm! Have a nice meal!?' What good is it if you don't actually give them what their body needs?"* (James 2:16 CEB)

A third traditional answer to the question of suffering is, in essence, to throw up your hands and say "It's a mystery." Now, there are many mysterious things in our lives: Why is it so often the case when I put six socks through the washer and dryer only five come out? Why does it seem to be a rule that your child tells you about the science fair project the night before it is due? Why do smoke detector batteries seem to only decide to alert you that they are low at 3:00 a.m.? These are mysteries, the stuff of everyday life. But suffering is not a mystery. Sometimes – not always, but sometimes – it comes because of actions we do, actions whose consequences are obvious and unavoidable. The decisions that you or I make generally have certain things that follow in their wake. If you treat people meanly, it is more likely than not that that is how you'll find yourself treated. If you spend your money on things that don't truly satisfy, you won't have money to spend on the things that are truly important. If you eat nothing but pork rinds and cheese whiz for a month there will be predictable consequences.

But sometimes suffering happens despite what you did or didn't do. And you don't understand why. And those folks who say to you "Everything happens for a reason" are either telling you something not very profound – that every effect has a cause – or they are claiming that God for some unfathomable reason decided to cause you suffering and hurt and pain. And I simply cannot go there, because I truly do

believe in the God whom Second Peter said wishes evil and suffering on no one (cf. 2 Peter 3:9).

There are, of course, many other ways folks have sought to understand suffering, but I want to offer a final way, one that I believe is more consistent with a God who is love unbounded and who is described in our scriptures for the morning. But first, we need a little theological background. Many of the earliest Christian theologians, those who are sometimes called the Church Fathers, believed, under the influence of Greek philosophy, that what was meant by God's being absolutely perfect is that God could not be affected or moved or changed by the world. One of the hymns we sometimes sing expresses this point of view: *"Immortal, invisible, God only wise.... We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree, And wither and perish—but nothing changes Thee."* I love that hymn, but you have to be careful with it. You see, if you say that God is, to quote another hymn, "pure unbounded love" you can't also say that God can't be moved by this world. To love is to risk being changed, to love is to risk being vulnerable, to love is to risk being hurt, to love is to take the chance that someone else will mean as much or more to you as you mean to yourself.

And isn't that precisely the picture of Jesus? Isn't such love what is expressed in our scripture from the gospel of John this morning: *"When Jesus saw her weeping... he was... deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' [And] Jesus began to weep."* And the verse from our Psalm also tells us the same thing about our God: *"The death of the Lord's faithful is a costly loss in his eyes."* Now, if you know that verse you may know it from its more traditional translation, *"The death of the Lord's faith is precious in his eyes."* But I much prefer our translation for today, because "precious" can imply that such death is somehow a good thing, but, more importantly, the word "costly" here tells us that such death – just as it was for Jesus and Lazarus – moves God, it costs God in the same way that it costs you and me when

someone dear suffers or dies.

What's the point, then, of all this? The most comforting and reassuring thing for us is to know that when we suffer, God is indeed moved by that and that God never leaves us absent. God is working in the midst of **everything** that occurs to try to bring what good is possible out of it. God will be there, not gloating but with grace. God will be there helping to pick up the pieces. The great philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead once said that "God is the fellow sufferer Who understands." That is no small thing, and it is not just an intellectual understanding. You and I know what it is like to share our suffering with someone who has been through something similar, for we know that they truly do understand. God, the One whose very Son truly did suffer – not just pretended to! – and truly did die knows and understands the suffering, then, that happens to you and me and this world.

What about suffering, then? God is with that Syrian toddler washed up dead on shore who only wanted to live in peace, and God is with those Syrian parents today whose children died a horrible death. God is with those who are homeless and those who live in terror because they are one financial emergency away from homelessness. God is with those police officers who serve because they want to better their communities and who daily go to work knowing that their job could be lethal. God is with those who are suffering the wounds of relationships that have been rent and torn apart and who aren't sure how they will go on. But, as always, God also gently but firmly challenges us to come alongside God: to temper our fear of the stranger and show them hospitality not hatred, to empathetically imagine that it is us who might have to take our children and live in a cardboard box, to remember what it is like to have a relationship end and offer not judgment but hope. For we too are called to be "*fellow sufferers who understand.*" For we serve a God who is love unwavering, Who does not send evil and pain, Who contends with a universe that contains both amazing beauty and awful threats, and Who is always there seeking to bring good. May we give thanks for those things and may we,

on this Palm Sunday, this day of both delight and desperation, ever more fully emulate our Savior and our God. May it be so. Amen.