

Fifth Sunday of Lent, Cycle B

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 5:7-9; and John 12:20-33

What are we to do with suffering? We resist it; we get angry – at ourselves, at the cause, at God. We grow bitter or deny it. We despair. Mostly though, we hurt and hurt and hurt. Some of us experience suffering during certain seasons of our lives; others spend our whole lives struggling with suffering.

If someone stands with us in the suffering, it makes all the difference. A friend, a family member, a church community, co-workers, a sports team – they are like water on parched lips. Their accompaniment does not remove the suffering, but it gets us through and that is no small thing.

The message of the cross of Jesus Christ is that God is with us in our suffering. Many ask, "How can this be? The Almighty by definition is beyond suffering." Others protest that it is unfair that suffering should have a place in our lives. All suffering is wrong. We do not like or want it; God mustn't either. Yet, in today's gospel, Jesus says of his crucifixion, "It was for this purpose that I came to this hour." And he will not walk away from it; he says, "I am troubled now. Yet what should I say, 'Father, save me from this hour?'" To those who want suffering to be somehow avoidable, he points to the way it is woven into the fabric of the world. "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit." Just as naturally, God is going to be with us in that suffering. This Sunday's readings want us to know deeply that God accompanies us in our suffering.

When I was a young woman, I moved far away from everyone who loved me and took a job that did not pay a living wage, all for a man I loved. When he left me, my heart was broken; it physically hurt. I cried every day for five months. One day, as I lay crying in my windowless bedroom, I became aware that someone else was in the room with me, sitting on the bed. Somehow, I knew this was God and God was as sad as I was. God was with me and that was no small thing.

Our first reading is part of a message of consolation from God (Jer 30-31). It is full of beautiful lines like, "I have loved you with an everlasting love" (31:3). God interlaces this comfort with descriptions of the rawness of the Israelites' suffering. They were starved into surrendering to the Babylonians and then massacred, exiled and enslaved. "Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted because they are no more" (31:15). Suffering does not simply disappear; it aches forever.

In this light, in 31:31-34, God offers a new covenant to be written on their hearts. Post-exilic Israel can have a different kind of relationship with God because God "will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more." Leonardo Boff wrote, "Forgiveness is love in pain."¹ God stayed with the Israelites despite their pushing God away. Note that vs 32, "they broke my covenant, and I had to show myself their master" can be better translated as "they broke my covenant, though I was their husband." Hear God's constancy! Imagine God's suffering! What is happening? We cannot fathom it, but it is real. God is fully with us in our pain and this changes us. Redemption arises in our hearts in the form of empathy and its accompanying desire to help others with similar pain. Redemption shapes in us a different set of values, rooted in love and mercy. The commitment to love becomes written on our hearts, an essential part of us. There is no going back; there is no way to be anything but loving.

Hebrews helps us ponder this mysterious fact further. God wants us to know God's solidarity with us in suffering and so God took the drastic step of becoming human in Jesus. But Jesus is not two separated parts; rather, the divine and the human were integrated into one person. His pain was real, as shown by his "loud cries and tears." In that union of human and divine, in Jesus' suffering, death itself was overcome. Let us never forget: God is with us utterly in our suffering and that is no small thing.

- ❖ What lessons of love have you learned from suffering?
- ❖ Whom do you know whose suffering is insurmountable or without purpose? How can you bring them love, forgiveness or mercy?

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¹ *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World*. Orbis Books, 1987. p. 131