

“Through Suffering” based on Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Sunday, Dec. 10, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

God says to the prophet, “Comfort my people.” He tells him to speak from the heart, speak tenderly. Speak compassionately to Jerusalem and tell her that her service has ended, her conscription, her warfare is no more, because her guilt is satisfied. These are different translations, holding the same meaning. Her sins have been pardoned.

These are words written to a nation in exile for several generations. It was 70 years earlier, when the Babylonian empire destroyed Judah, and the city of Jerusalem was laid waste and exploited with all of its assets removed or destroyed. People who remained were left in extreme poverty, while many others were taken to Babylon to live in exile in a foreign land. Now, God is telling the exiles, you’re going home.

At home, and in exile, this was a time of great suffering for the people. Another book, the book of Lamentations was written from the perspective of those who remained in the city of Jerusalem. It ends with a plea for God to restore the people, with the caveat at its end, that is, ‘unless you have utterly rejected us and are angry, beyond measure.’ That is the degree of their hurt.

Now, our reading from the beginning of the second section of the book of Isaiah and it opens with a reminder that the covenant faithfulness of God cannot be broken, even by the sins of the people. God will restore peace, or wholeness, by putting things in their right order, telling the prophet to speak comfort, with words from the heart.

This is how Mark starts his gospel also – He says, “This is the start of the good news of Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God,” and then he quotes Isaiah, with a touch of Malachi, as he introduces John the Baptist as the voice of one calling out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.” This is the desert highway on which the Lord our God will travel. Isaiah goes on to say, “The valley will be exalted, the mountains humbled, The crooked made straight, the rough, made a plain.”

I believe Mark recognizes this path as a metaphor for all the people to whom God is reaching. The people are in the wilderness, whether it is the humble poor who need to be lifted up, or the powerful and wealthy of this world who need to be brought low. It may be the deceitful, crooked, or bent, who need to become upright, and those bound, the rough, the impassable, the imprisoned, who need the freedom of the level plains. And so, these are the people coming to John for baptism. These are the people to whom the good news is announced. This is a baptism of repentance, which in Greek means a change of mind, and in Hebrew, means a turning away from sin, toward God.

Mark’s gospel has no infancy narrative. It has no story of Jesus’s birth. I really don’t think it’s because Mark didn’t know the story or because Mark didn’t believe it. I think Mark instead, keys in on the life of Jesus as the fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy in the second section from chapters 40 to 55. This section is the second exodus. The first was Israel escaping bondage in Egypt. Now this is Judah returning from exile in Babylon. Now Mark writes of the third exodus from sin and death.

Isaiah 40 to 55 proclaims the people of Judah’s return from exile, and this is also the section that reveals for us the Suffering Servant, who is at once is the people of Israel and the arm of God, or God’s power. For Mark this parallels Jesus the fully human true Israelite, and fully one with God.

You see, the prophecy of Isaiah points forward 70 years to the return from Babylonian captivity on one level, but it is clear that there is more to it since the prophecy says that the glory of the Lord will be revealed to all flesh, and in the details about the suffering servant, Isaiah says that “all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.” It’s more than the specifics of returning, but also points 500 years forward to Jesus, and Mark recognizes this.

It is in the parallel of Mark’s gospel and this second section of the book of Isaiah that I think we see the theme for today, that through suffering, God is with us. Each and every one of us in this room today and reading this text has a sorrow weighing on us. Each of us has a burden, a longing for peace. We have a longing for wholeness There is something that is for us a source of suffering on one level or another.

It may be personal, or it may be that we look out on the world, and see wars and atrocities, the horrific attacks that kill people at random and horrific counter attacks that kill many more. We see the impact of our divisions, the racism and sexism around us, the fear we have of others, and a refusal to accept that there is truth. All of this is sad.

Yet, this is the suffering that is might be easier to answer since we see the role of sin. We can see the idolatry we have for the false gods of victimhood, of supremacy, of nations, of heritage, of cultural norms, of tribalism, of ourselves. We can trace these to the idolatry we have for our own human capability, as if every answer can be found in our own ingenuity, whether for society through politics, economics, philosophy, and science, or individually, through hard work, the right beliefs, and pride.

But what of those suffering in the aftermath of a natural disaster, the illnesses faced by newborn children, the cancers crippling faithful believers, the sudden onset of a pandemic that kills millions? Sure, we can try to blame the victims here too – it’s global warming, it’s something the parents did, it’s some unconfessed sin, or in the case of the pandemic, many voices were saying, “Oh, it’s not COVID, it’s the co-morbidities and other factors,” as if that justified the terror.

Beloved, the reality is that there is a great deal of suffering in this world, and we think an awful lot of ourselves if we think we can explain it away with a perfect explanation. Whether that is God’s divine wrath, or the consequences of the victim’s life or lifestyle.

I know the hardest part of suffering is our tendency to ask the question, “why God? Why?” We believe in an all-powerful God, and we want to jump straight ahead to triumph. After all, if God is good, then why wouldn’t God want to do the same? And in truth, I cannot answer the question of why, nor will I try. What I can affirm instead is that we are not alone in this suffering. God has shared in our limits, our challenges, and our suffering in and through the person and work of our Lord Jesus. But what’s more, the Holy Spirit is with us now, enduring with us the trials of this life, as Paul said, groaning with all of creation and all of us in our pain, groaning even on our behalf.

This is why I have no interest in generally proving the existence of God. I see many a Christian apologist trying to establish just the unmoved mover of Aristotle, as if they think that if you can get that one block to move, it’s smooth sailing, and every nonbeliever will quickly become a Christian. I don’t like this idea of being obsessed with a philosophical god force, a god. No, for me, belief in a supreme deity, a beginning of all things, a something at the beginning, by itself doesn’t add up to much.

Instead, I see the God of the bible is the Creator of all things, yet this God speaks to people as individuals. The God of the bible oversees creation, yet this God intervenes to change things, or what we call miracles. The God of the bible is eternal, yet unlike the god of philosophy, this God loves, grieves, becomes human, suffers, dies, and rises again. This God stays with us to make us temples individually and corporately as his temple.

The God of the bible, the God I believe in, is not a provable idea, but an active force in a world where suffering is real, and my God chose to endure that suffering for us. God did this for you, for all of humanity in the person of Jesus, who is the eternal Son, fully one with the Father, and yet lived fully in your limits and mine. He died for us that shameful death on the cross, only to rise again.

Beloved, this is the God I believe in, and this is the God of the Christian faith, the God who humbly shared in our humanity, so that we might share in God's life. This is a life that is abundant and eternal, it is an inheritance belonging only rightfully to the Son, but by becoming one of us, he has shared it with us as adopted children, with God's own Spirit as the downpayment to empower us. It's not a reward, but an empowerment to work with God and share in God's new creation.

My sisters and brothers, in the face of the suffering we face and the suffering of the world, we need to recover the lost art of lament, which is so vital to scripture. We often just want to jump past it and go straight to praise and all the joyful happy things. I know last week I said to choose joy, and that is true that we choose joy, just as I will in a moment say we must choose peace.

Yet, through lament, we need to face the suffering of this world, stare it down, and look to Emmanuel, the God who is with us, by our side. God is so near, that our God has lived our life, and lives in and among us now. We need to address God with our complaints, make our confessions of our own sin, the things we have done to contribute to the problem, the things we have failed to do, and even confess the things which our culture has done, that we may personally may not be directly responsible for. We do this so that we can then petition God to fix it and trust that God will.

This does not absolve us from our responsibility to share in that fix, but it removes the temptation to see suffering, first as something that God has done as punishment for others, or second, it removes our impulse to think we are the messiah, that we are the solution to everything.

When we lament and bring our frustrations to God, it's ok to be angry with God. There's a whole book of the bible of being angry with God. When we do just that in lament, we connect with God and recognize our place beneath a sovereign God who loves us and will not separate from us.

Beloved, we can proclaim, let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me, because when we see the suffering of this world, when we face our own suffering, we can choose to trust in God, who shared in our suffering, and thereby choose to be peace and be wholeness, for those we meet, as we face the suffering of this world.

But it is God's power, not ours that this peace will be made complete. In lament, we trust in God's sovereignty to act, which comes in and through us and others as ministers of reconciliation, But we do this because over and above anything we can do, we know that our God is with us through the suffering, and in Christ, our God suffered for us to bring us peace. Amen.