

Order of Worship

Second Sunday in Lent, February 28, 2021

WELCOME

Hello God, thank you for this day.

It's 9:03 and we need your help.

Guide us by your Holy Spirit to reach new people,

Connect us all through Christ's love, and

Empower us to love and serve others. Amen.

PRELUDE

Cyfelach

D. Thomas

CALL TO WORSHIP

Psalm 22:25-31

UMH 753

HYMN 185

When Morning Gilds the Skies

LAUDES DOMINI

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

PASTORAL PRAYER AND LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

HYMN 415

Take Up Thy Cross

GERMANY

SCRIPTURE

Mark 8:31-38

MESSAGE

Rev. Rebecca Voss

GENEROSITY, INVITATIONS and CELEBRATIONS

HYMN 396

O Jesus, I Have Promised

ANGEL'S STORY

BENEDICTION

POSTLUDE

Kyrie in D Minor, III. Recit

J.F.J. Benaut

PRAYER CORNER

Please call the office at (715) 842-2201 or Pastor Rebecca's cell phone at (920)-360-7396 to let us know if you need pastoral care or would like to talk and pray to help lift whatever is a burden or joy in your life. If you would like to be part of an email prayer chain, please contact the office so we can revive and strengthen our prayer ministry at First UMC.

Thirsting for God SUFFERING Pastor Rebecca Voss

A word – and an experience – that we all do our best to avoid is “suffering”. It could be pain caused by someone else, from the consequences of our own actions, or simply by circumstances out of anyone’s control. Our hearts are wrenched when we see the innocent suffer. Our minds can’t make sense of why the good die young. Our souls may even crumble when it seems like there is only deafening silence from God.

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus told his followers that he would “*undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed...*” Understandably, Peter didn’t think this was the best way for Jesus to be a beacon of hope and told him so. After all, who would want to follow someone whose life will lead to suffering, rejection, and a cruel death? That’s when most of us would let the driver know we’re ready to get off the bus.

The problem of suffering has been a crossroads for nearly everyone throughout history. Every religion and philosophy has different approaches to deal with it. From an Old Testament perspective, the book of Proverbs emphasizes that if we live with ‘Wisdom’ and the ‘Fear of the Lord’, then we generally will be able to avoid suffering. The book of Ecclesiastes essentially agrees, but adds that there are mysteries about life, suffering, and death we can’t understand. The book of Job boils down to say there are too many complexities for our human minds to figure out why the innocent suffer, and it’s the wrong question to be asking in the first place.

Once again, Jesus comes along as the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets of the Old Testament. He shocks his followers with his open warning that he will go through great suffering ahead. They know he is innocent. He has more wisdom and fear of God than anyone they have ever met. Maybe he should read more Proverbs.

Peter doesn’t want to see the evil and injustice Jesus describes will cause his suffering. Jesus had just named all the religious authorities – elders, chief priests, and scribes – who will find his teachings to be dangerous to their religious systems. He doesn’t want Peter and those who truly believe and follow him to be left unwarned about the so-called religious leaders. But Peter – and each of us – will have a reckoning with suffering in order to understand the nature of an all-knowing, all-good, and all-powerful God.

Peter pulls Jesus aside and “rebukes” him to stop thinking and talking this way. Jesus’ response likely shocked Peter even more. *“Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”* (Mark 8:33). There’s a battle of who is in charge – Peter or Jesus. Like Peter, we often assume that if Jesus (God) is all-knowing, that he would know how to avoid suffering. If he was all-good, then people would respect and follow that. If he was all-powerful, then he could intervene and stop the stupid. But those assumptions are how humans (and apparently Satan) think about suffering, and not how God sees and deals with suffering.

Last week we explored “Tempting” when Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness. We are likewise tempted to think that God’s children should be able to avoid suffering, rejection, and death. We think that there can be power without pain, and glory without humility. But Jesus knows all of that is a devil of an idea. When he commands Peter to “Get behind me, Satan”, he is reminding Peter (and us) that his disciples are not to guide and protect God. We are to follow behind Jesus and know that he will carefully lead us through suffering. He calls Peter “Satan”, which literally means “adversary”, because Peter’s thinking (and often ours) opposes God’s plan.

Jesus then calls his disciples and the crowd together to explain how to think about suffering: *“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?*

Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? (Mark 8:35-37) Jesus is not telling people to “buck up” when life throws punches. He’s telling us to be willing to follow God into uncomfortable if not dangerous situations in order to offer life and hope for all who suffer. It’s the center of the Christian faith – following Christ!

If we look at where Christ goes, we see his goal is not our comfort. He spends more time in the wilderness than the mountaintop. He spends more time with the sick than the healthy. He spends more time with the poor than the rich. He spends more time with the down-and-out than the high-and-mighty. If we’re following Jesus, we’ll likely find ourselves alongside the suffering more often than with the comfortable. God’s goal is not our external comfort, but our internal contentment by following Jesus to help the suffering.

There are multiple miracles at work here. The first is the powerful healing through Jesus to give suffering people dignity and wholeness in their mind, body, and spirit. And the second is like it – that Jesus calls us, even when we are broken and suffering in various ways – to follow him and be agents of healing and hope for others.

Going back to the beginning – Genesis – we heard a story today about the Lord appearing to Abram. Abram was a prominent and wealthy but very flawed man. He and his wife Sarai also suffered from the heartbreak of being childless. They had faithfully followed God years beforehand when God told them to leave what was comfortable (their family and homeland) and “*Go, to the place I will show you*” (Gen. 12:1). Despite usually following God, their dreams of children and a legacy were extinguished.

Then at the age of 99, Abram had another God-encounter and heard the words, “*I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless.*” (Gen. 17:1). “But wait!”, you say. “I thought we were supposed to follow after God and not before God!” You’re right. The phrase translated “walk before me” literally means to keep your face toward God. It reminds me of overhearing a teacher remind all their online students, “Don’t point your computer camera to the ceiling. I need to see all your eyes all the time so I know you’re paying attention.”

God gets Abram’s attention and lays out the terms and conditions: Face Me, Follow Me, and Be Faultless (more on that last one another day). God makes a promise: “*You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations...I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.*” (Gen. 17:4-7)

It isn’t a promise to Abraham (or to us as his spiritual offspring) of great comfort, but to be “exceedingly fruitful”. It isn’t about the worldly power, riches, and everything else we think we need to avoid suffering. It is a promise that even if we don’t feel young enough, wise enough, rich enough, or strong enough, that God promises to lead us. As The Message version says, “*Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You’re not in the driver’s seat; I am. Don’t run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I’ll show you how.*” (Mark 8:34-35 MSG). Amen.