

GOD & SUFFERING

Proverbs 16:4

Message for SHPD Parade of Lights

Oct. 7, 2008

PURPOSE – To present Christian responses to the problem of evil & suffering, inviting listeners to follow the Suffering Savior as the way through the pain of this age.

I. INTRODUCTION

SHFD, other Departments here represented
Mayor DeGraff and Village Officials
Family & Guests,

Thank you for this invitation to speak. I always find this a meaningful event.

1. The text I have selected for this message comes from the Book of Proverbs – ch. 16:4

“The Lord works out everything for his own ends – even the wicked for a day of disaster.”

ANOTHER TRANSLATION of that verse reads:

“God made everything with a place and purpose; even the wicked are included – but for judgment.”

(i) The verse introduces a subject NOT FAR from our thoughts tonight – GOD & SUFFERING
- It’s been called “The Riddle of the Universe”

2. In a few moments, we’ll again see on the screens the names, locations and dates of those firefighters who died in the line of duty this past year.

But those names and dates are much more than statistics. They are people ... with families and friends.

- Each of those names represent:

A wife now lying alone in bed at night,

a daughter now without her dad cheering on from the soccer sidelines,

a friend missing from the card table.

= Emptiness ... Pain ... Suffering

(i) No one's IMMUNE to it in this age.

- We yet have 2 families from our church unable to return to their homes that they were forced to evacuate in the recent flood.

- My hardest pastoral visit this year was to a woman whose 53 year husband was struck and killed while bicycling – the loss is still so raw

- A young couple in our church gave their hearts to a foster child whom they come to love as a son ... only to have him unjustly yanked from their lives.

A. Suffering – no one's immune to it. And it can come in DEEP, DEEP WAYS.

3. Where's God in relation to this pain?

- Let me share with you A FEW THOUGHTS that the subject of God & suffering invite us to consider:

II. CONSIDERATIONS

First, from this subject consider that it PRESUPPOSES A GOOD GOD.

1. That may seem an odd statement to start with - and this consideration is certainly best thought upon when one is not personally in the pain of suffering ...

But in our context tonight, it IS vitally important that you see that pain & suffering do bear witness to a God who is good.

(i) When you see that child in Africa suffer because his parents have died of AIDS, his country is in drought, his government is corrupt ... you say to yourself: "That's WRONG ... that's BAD ... that's not how things SHOULD BE! ... It's not right!"

- But why do we evaluate that way?

- What standard do we use to say something is bad or good?

- And where does that standard come from?

A. Innately we have a sense of right and wrong. We have a sense of justice.

If a kid steals the purse of an elderly lady – "That's wrong"

When a child dies of malnutrition, we say, "That's not right!"

... But where does that thought come from?

B. What makes right right and wrong wrong - unless there's someone who ultimately determines & upholds it?

Where even do those categories of evaluation come from?

(ii) Certainly not the story of evolution. If all we are is the survival of the fittest ...

= "Too bad", we say to that dying African child. "That's the way life goes. It's not good; it's not bad. It just is."

But deep in our heart, we evaluate suffering as NOT GOOD, not the way things should be ... and the reason we react that way is because there really IS GOOD ... AND BAD ... RIGHT & WRONG – because there's a GOD – our Maker and Judge - who IS GOOD.

The innate sense of right and wrong we are created with points to a CREATOR who IS GOOD and will UPHOLD right & wrong.

- Our personal reaction to suffering bears witness to this.

2. That leads to a couple of DERIVATIVE CONSIDERATIONS:

(i) One is that this world is NOT as it should be.

- It's estimated that 4/5ths of human suffering is caused by humans being WRONG to one another!

(ii) Two, if this world is not as it should be, suffering comes to remind us that this world (or more precisely, THIS AGE) just MAY NOT BE OUR FINAL DESTINATION!

- The pain & restlessness that suffering brings, wakens in us the desire for another state, another age, another home – one that suits the matches the deep longings in my heart.

A. C.S. Lewis, a Christian writer from last century, states: *God whispers to us about this home in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. Pain is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.*

He adds, *"The security we crave might teach us to rest our hearts in this world and pose an obstacle to return to God – but the pain of this age wakens us for that journey."*

B. You paramedics know that PAIN CAN BE A VERY GOOD THING.

We had a couple of you by our church not too long ago to treat a diabetic whose “pain” – whose wooziness, verbal repetition, delusionary condition, inability to walk – all alerted us to something potentially much worse – low blood sugar which could have caused significant brain damage.

But that did not happen – because that pain alerted us to action – calling you, getting an injection, preventing worse damage.

In that sense, pain – as much as it TASTES BAD – can be HELPFUL

... alerting us to action ... starting us on a JOURNEY – to be restored to Goodness Itself.

3. ... which brings us to a THIRD CONSIDERATION in this subject of God & suffering.

- The consideration of a unique person in history who claimed: I AM THE WAY!

= “I LEAD THE JOURNEY that pain AWAKENS us to take ... to the RESTORATION to GOODNESS - ... beginning now, INTO the NEXT AGE ...

➤ “Come, FOLLOW ME ... I AM THE WAY”

That person is JESUS – and there are 2 things about his life that should cause us to seriously consider His CLAIM & INVITATION.

(i) One is that HE suffered.

He was not aloof to the suffering of this age that you and I encounter. The enduring symbol of his life is a CROSS. He suffered violently, unjustly, deeply.

A. John Stott contrasts this qualification for leadership with Buddha. He writes, *“I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time, after a while, I have had to turn away. And in imagination I have turned to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the Lord for me! He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us.”*

(ii) The other qualification Jesus offers to lead us through the suffering of this age is the fact that HE ROSE FROM THE DEAD.

A. One of the reasons Jesus suffered and died as He did was on account of his claim to be the presence of God on earth – the unique “Son of God”. The religious establishment of the day didn’t like that. It led to his suffering & death.

He STAKED His CLAIM of being the unique presence of God with us FULLY on a prediction – That He would rise from the dead – to a new life beyond pain & suffering.

So His resurrection would be the public certification that He is the WAY.

And it happened!

I don’t have time to go into all the reasons why that’s a certifiable piece of history – but suffice it to say that the lives of his followers who met Him after the resurrection were changed from fear to boldness; they eventually were martyred for their witness (would they die for a lie? Hoax?); and the religious establishment – who had everything to gain by simply finding his dead body – never could. HE ROSE FROM THE DEAD.

HE IS GOD OUR MAKER – THE GOOD GOD - WITH US.

4. Which brings us to a FOURTH CONSIDERATION ...

... that SUFFERING IS NOW NOT MEANINGLESS!

(i) One thing Jesus taught about his sufferings was that they were REDEMPTIVE.

= that they had MEANING – that the pain wasn’t random waste

A. Jesus taught that by his sufferings & death, we could have peace with God.

- That they covered what we owed God in our own contributions to the suffering of this age, our shortcomings before Him.
- Jesus invited us to trust in sufferings & death for the forgiveness of our sins.

So His sufferings are REDEMPTIVE for us BEFORE GOD – uniquely so.

(ii) But his sufferings are also redemptive for OUR OWN SUFFERING.

- A. Sometimes we suffer simply for doing what's right in this world ... even doing our job (like those names on the screen – and now their families).
- That's how Jesus suffered – for doing right and standing up for those things that matter. Because He did so, in those kind of sufferings, we now have a sense of partnership with God. We're NOT ALONE. We know a taste of Jesus' Spirit in those sufferings.

B. More often, though, suffering just comes our way without any choice on our part. Jesus' sufferings, death & resurrection also redeem those kind of sufferings.

Suffering is not VOID of meaning – because we now know that God is with us. He's been there. He knows what we're feeling. He weeps with us, if need be.

(iii) And because Jesus rose again, there's a further promise that God will bring good out of our pain. That's what He did with Jesus' life. And that's what He promises to do with ours! That doesn't mean that we have EASY ANSWERS for suffering AT ALL.

- Many times we have no answers, no words.

- A. What it means that we can have a TRUST in the midst of suffering. A trust that God has not abandoned me. That He will be there with me in & through this pain. And that He will bring me MEASURES of goodness & meaning in this life ... and EVEN MORE - full goodness, full meaning - in the age to come.

MY SUFFERING WILL BE REDEEMED BECAUSE JESUS ROSE AGAIN.

5. ... Which brings us to a FINAL CONSIDERATION on this subject of God & suffering:

Namely, True life (and death) depends on how we RESPOND TO THIS RIDDLE OF THE UNIVERSE.

No one stays the same when they encounter suffering, even an encounter as slight as seeing names on a screen.

The way we respond to the riddle of suffering is a matter of life and death.

(i) Many people are HARDENED by suffering. They isolate. They shut down. Their life becomes smaller. They take the wrong journey – withdrawal from love / emptiness / death. That's the journey to hell.

God, in his goodness, ALLOWS YOU that freedom of choice – He did not create us as robots.

Proverbs 16:4 – *He makes everything with a place and purpose – even the wicked for a day of disaster.*

(ii) But that choice is NOT GOD’S DESIRE for you.

He sent His presence to earth in Jesus as THE WAY to another DESTINATION in response to suffering ... RESTORED TO HIS GOODNESS HIMSELF – reconciled to God, life in partnership with His Spirit.

= That’s TRUE LIFE ... today – and in the age to come.

- A. To follow Jesus as THE WAY is to put our life in His sufferings, death & resurrection
- For our peace with God in forgiveness
 - For trust & meaning in our present sufferings
 - To honor Him each day as our ultimate Chief

That life is the beginning of heaven on earth.

III. CONCLUSION

The choice is with us tonight – because suffering leaves no one the same.

Life or death? Heaven or Hell? How will you respond? What journey are you on?
Jesus is the WAY of eternal life through this age of suffering.

1. Hasan Tafti is a Jesus-follower. He’s from Iran. In 1980, his teen-age son, BAHRAM, was murdered.

In his deep pain & suffering, however, he wrote this prayer which shows that he’s on the journey of eternal life, being restored to Goodness Itself:

*God, before You, I remember not only Bahram – but also his murderers;
Not because they killed him in the prime of his youth and made my heart bleed & tears flow,
Not because with this savage act they’ve disgraced the name of my country;
but because through their crime, I now follow your footsteps more closely in the way
of suffering & sacrifice.*

*May the terrible fire of this calamity burn up in me all selfishness;
May its flame reveal in me the depths & dimensions of hatred.*

His death makes obvious, as never before, my need to trust in your love shown in the Cross & resurrection of Jesus;

Love which frees me from hate toward my persecutors;

Love which brings patience & courage, greatness of heart.

Love which deepens my trust in Your final victory for this world;

Love which teaches me to prepare to face my own day of death.

O God,

Bahram's blood has multiplied the fruit of the Spirit in the soil of my soul.

So when his murderers stand before you on the Day of Judgment,

Remember that fruit ... and forgive.

For the honor of Jesus' name. Amen.

2. God & suffering.

There's a man on THE WAY - being restored to Goodness Himself.

Probably farther along the journey than you and I will ever get in this age. But who knows?

You'll never know unless you yourself choose that journey ... IN JESUS – the Way, the Truth and the Life.

AMEN