

Living with Good Friday
April 10, 2009 (Good Friday)
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I. Introduction

C.S. Lewis was baptized an Anglican, but became an atheist as a teenager. He returned to Christianity in his 30's and became one of the world's most renowned apologists for the faith. Lewis was an academic, teaching at Oxford and Cambridge, and his approach to faith was a fairly academic one; as was his approach to suffering, a subject about which he wrote much. And much suffering he attributed to sin. In The Problem of Pain, he refers to suffering as God's "megaphone to a deaf world."

But his perspective changed somewhat when he experienced suffering of his own. Late in life, Lewis married an American woman named Joy Gresham, who was much younger than him; and initially, it was a marriage in name only, so that she could immigrate to England. But after their marriage, Lewis actually fell deeply in love with Joy, a story that became the play and movie "Shaddowlands."

Joy developed terminal bone cancer and died in 1960, leaving Lewis devastated and bereft. He wrote about Joy's death and his own grieving process in a powerful little book called A Grief Observed. It's a pretty raw book, and he writes about his disappointment and disillusionment with God, saying,

"But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in the face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the window."

Nobody gets away from pain. It doesn't matter if you're a great theologian, a good person, a successful person. Everyone suffers. And as if suffering weren't enough – as Lewis points out – it is often precisely at our most acute moments of suffering that we feel God most absent. There comes a point when all the sand castles we have built around ourselves get washed away by the incoming tide, and we are left utterly alone. The mighty fortress that is our God, the solid rock on which we stand, is nowhere to be found. And all the comforting theology and words are meaningless. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

II. Inevitable Suffering

The question of suffering may be the most difficult of our faith: how can an all-loving and all-powerful God allow us to suffer. Whole books of the Bible are devoted to it: the prophet Habakkuk and, of course, most famously, the book of Job.

Job is the story of a righteous and “successful” man, whom God allows Satan to test. Job has everything, a large, wonderful family, great wealth and reputation. And in a handful of verses in the first chapter of the book, the writer recounts how Job has everything stripped away. First he loses all his livestock, and then his property, and finally all his children are killed. And when that wasn’t quite enough to get him to curse God, Satan inflicts his body with sores and boils. Job is left with *nothing*, sitting amidst the ashes of his former wealth, scratching his sores with a broken piece of pottery.

But the vast majority of the book – the next 40 Chapters – is a philosophical dialogue between Job and these three “friends” of his: Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. And we all know these folks: they come to Job to “comfort him” in his affliction, saying: “Oh, I’m soooo sorry. Maybe if you had planned a little better... if only you had disciplined your children more if only you hadn’t been a smoker.”

Their message is C.S. Lewis’s: that suffering is the result of sin. And there certainly is a great deal of suffering that can be attributed to our sinfulness; but there is much that cannot. And Job, on our behalf, keeps saying, “No! It’s not that simple.” Finally after nearly 40 chapters of going around about this, God comes down in a whirlwind and says:

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
5 Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
6 On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone
7 when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?”

In other words, “Stop talking, when you don’t know what you’re talking about.” The point of Job is the unfathomability of suffering. And while that’s a better answer than Job’s friends’ answer, it is ultimately unsatisfying.

III. The Cross

So the question still hangs there unanswered. And for us as Christians, that ultimately brings us here: Good Friday and the Cross. The cross is the instrument of torture and oppression through which God reveals the fullness of divine wisdom. It is the heart of all Christian theology.

On the cross, the question of suffering finds its answer. Or rather, its answerer. On the cross, we meet the one who has, and is, the answer to all questions. On the cross, in the person of Jesus, God chooses to submit to the rules we live by and experience our suffering at its deepest levels. Jesus experiences our suffering so completely that he shares the physical pain of this brutal execution, the emotional humiliation, *and* the spiritual abandonment of God the Father.

This is a mind-boggling concept. We have spent this Lent exploring the Apostles' Creed and looking at the doctrine of the Trinity. We talked about the Trinity in terms of God being in communion – in relationship – with God's self. But on the cross, the Son of God experiences the abandonment of God the Father. These two persons of the eternal Trinity, who have been together since before worlds were born, since before time itself, *at this point* in the history of eternity experience separation. The Son is abandoned by the Father, and the Father loses the Son to humiliation, suffering, and death. This is what the cry on the cross is about: God experiencing the abandonment of God's *own self*.

This is God's answer to suffering: that despite how it sometimes *feels*, we are never alone in it. It is not an intellectual answer; but it touches our most profound sense of isolation. Complete as our abandonment in suffering may feel, God knows it and shares it with us. Our suffering is a part of God's suffering. Emily Dickinson wrote a letter in which she said, "When Jesus tells us about his Father, we distrust him; when he shows us his home, we turn away; but when he confides to us that he is acquainted with grief, we listen, for that is also an acquaintance of our own."

IV. Practical Ramifications

So what does that mean for us as we gather tonight on this Good Friday? First, it means that there is no way to get around suffering. God doesn't even get around suffering. Now on one level, this is obvious; but we spend a lot of time as individuals and as a society trying. We medicate it through drugs; we anesthetize through alcohol; we insulate ourselves from it through wealth; drown out its cry through a constant wall of sound.

But we cannot escape suffering; the most we can do is hide for a time, and it always catches up with us. And the message of Good Friday is that death and suffering need to be lived and felt. Our ancestors on that first Good Friday didn't know that Easter was coming. But knowing that Easter is coming sometimes makes it harder to really take Good Friday seriously. The truth is that we cannot experience the joy of Easter and the power of the resurrection without going through Good Friday.

Second, just as God has chosen to share our suffering, we are called to share the suffering of others. On an *individual level*, that means just being with people in their pain – not to make it better, not to explain it away, just to share it. And friends, we Christians are lousy at this. We just can't be around suffering. We want to take the pain away, cheer people up. We shower people in grief with meaningless platitudes.

We could learn a little from our Jewish sisters and brothers in the practice of *shiva*, which is when you visit a person in mourning. When you sit *shiva* with someone, the etiquette is that you can't speak unless the person grieving speaks first. Try it sometime; it's hard just sitting with the grieving.

On a *corporate level*, that means placing ourselves as a community among those who suffer. We live in a city and a world filled with suffering and we can't insulate ourselves from it. We are called to actively engage it, to be there. And we can do that knowing that that is where God also is.

V. Conclusion

Paul tells us that the Cross is an outrage; and he's right. It represents everything our culture tells us to avoid and that we want to avoid. It is the cold, hard place where all our dreams are shattered and die. But the truth of our faith is that unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains alone.

Amen