

Easter 6A (5/21/17)

Acts 17:22-31

Psalm 66:8-20

1 Peter 3:13-22

John 14:15-21

The problem of pervasive suffering raises a fundamental question: How can a sovereign and all-loving God permit the kind of pain and brokenness we see all around us? God does not rescue us from suffering and death, but enters the depth of lived experience, endures it with us, and finally transforms it. And our faith is measured not by perfect understanding or confidence, but rather by our willingness to account for the hope that is in us.

“Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.” What a remarkable directive. The author of our reading from First Peter today could have insisted that followers of Jesus always be ready to account for our doctrinal formulas, or our theological ideas, or our strength of belief. But instead, he urges the recipients of the letter – and by extension, all of us – to be ready to account for our *hope*. Hope is something other than belief. **Hope is a conviction of the heart, an ember that glows, however faintly, even in the obscurity of our suffering and our cynicism.**

“Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.” This is no chicken soup for the soul. The author of First Peter is not oblivious to hardship and heartache. In fact, he acknowledges that the early Christ-followers to whom he writes are likely to suffer persecution on account of their identity and practice:

...even if you suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated. ...Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.

All afflictions are not created equal. Twenty-first-century American Christians cannot truly comprehend the burden of religious persecution. Nevertheless, we know suffering – physical, emotional, social – both our own and that of others, all that prevents us from living full lives individually and in community with one another. And the problem of pervasive suffering raises a fundamental question: **How can a sovereign and all-loving God permit the kind of pain and brokenness we see all around us?**

A candidate for ordination arrived at her final meeting with the synodical committee that had evaluated and supported her since she first acknowledged the call to ministry. This meeting was the last step in the process of becoming a pastor, yet one defining issue had never come up in conversation. The aspiring pastor suffered from an incurable congenital disease that periodically overwhelmed her with pain and would eventually cause her death. It was the elephant in the room. Finally, a member of the committee worked up the courage to ask the candidate to reflect on her illness from the perspective of faith. How did she deal with it? Pausing for a long moment, she looked up at a cross hanging on the wall of the meeting space and said: “Sometimes I need to see a cross with Jesus on it to know that I’m

not alone. Sometimes I need to see a cross without Jesus on it to know that this isn't all there is."

"Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you." Suffering and hope go hand in hand. For reasons beyond our grasp, this life is not without adversity. For beloved Son of God himself, incarnation involves a full immersion into pain and death: "Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God," writes the author of First Peter. "He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit...." **The mystery of the cross is that Jesus' unity with us in weakness somehow brings us into unity with God. And the cross, as it turns out, isn't all there is.**

Dear church, God does not rescue us from suffering and death. Rather, God enters the depth of lived experience, endures it with us, and finally transforms it. The resurrection is no guarantee of easy faith. But **our faith is not measured by perfect understanding or confidence. Rather, our faith is measured by our readiness to account for the hope that is in us, hope that persists in Christ in spite of all that threatens to snuff it out.**

By way of conclusion, let me share with you an account that gets at the heart of my own hope for the church and the world:

[Excerpts from Alan Storey, "Whose Hand Needs the Holding?"¹]

¹ *Holden Village Voice*, Spring 2017, 6-7.