

**“Where is God when we suffer?”**  
**Romans 5:1-8**  
**Westminster Presbyterian Church, Nashville**  
**July 15, 2007**  
**Pulpit exchange**  
**Mike Magee**

**Pre-scripture introduction**

Karl Barth says John 3:16 is the Good News in a nutshell. I love John 3:16, I really do. But I think if scripture is really Good News, it must address the problem of suffering in the here and now, not just in the bye and bye. So I propose an alternative to John 3:16 as the Good News in a nutshell. I propose Romans chapter 5:1-8.

Apostle Paul and his scribe walk down to a seashore near Corinth, Greece. He is probably only 47 years old, but has suffered many trials, preached many sermons, written many letters, and started many churches. His plan to visit the new house church in Rome is cut short by a call back to Jerusalem. And he hears in Jerusalem there is a plot to kill him. If so, his career and life will soon be over. He fears his first visit to the new house church in Rome will not happen. He fights back the mist in his eye and the frog in his throat. While standing on a boulder at the seashore near Corinth, he looks up at the seagulls beckoning him toward Jerusalem, then out over the breaking surf toward Rome. He squares his shoulders and boldly dictates what will become his last surviving letter, a letter to the house church in Rome.

**Scripture reading**

**Movement 1: Pain and suffering are not the same**

USA Today says 19% of Americans have chronic pain. And 40% have pain due to recent injury or surgery. Miriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary defines pain as “a bodily sensation induced by noxious stimulus, typically leading to evasive action.” Pain

measurement is now the fifth vital sign, added by nurses to the traditional pulse, temperature, blood pressure, and respiratory rate. Physicians know pain has its usefulness. A child born with the inability to feel pain does not live very long. She must be taught that she cannot place her hand on a hot iron or stove top. She must be taught to bend her knees to protect them when she jumps or falls. In her book entitled “Suffering,” Dorothy Soelle says pain is part of the human condition. To live is to endure pain. And to live is to die. Pain and death are not evil. Their only meaning is that we are creatures and not God. Harold Kushner says if we are ever going to find peace, we must find it amid the pounding surf of pain and death.

Paul says something rather shocking to his scribe at the seashore near Corinth: “We *do something* in our sufferings.” Usually I prefer the NRSV translation over the NIV, but I believe the NIV is more understandable here. The NIV translates the Greek here as, “We *rejoice* in our sufferings,” not “We *boast* in our sufferings.” We will get back to the rejoicing and boasting in a moment, but for now let us look at what Paul might mean with the word, “sufferings.”

We have just defined pain. But pain and suffering are not the same. Webster’s defines suffering as “feeling keenly.” You can have physical pain and not suffer, and you can suffer and not have physical pain. A survey asked cancer patients if their pain could be relieved, would they continue to suffer. Almost all answered, “Yes.” A recent cancer patient told me that if pain is the fifth vital sign, suffering should be the sixth vital sign. I wish to make this point: We all know that pain can cause suffering, but pain and suffering are not the same. Pain on the one hand is irritated nerve endings. But I wish to propose to you that pain only causes suffering when accompanied by a feeling of abandonment.

## **Movement 2: Suffering isolates us from God and each other**

A pair of school boy brothers decide to play a prank. They “borrow” a young girl’s ruler. The teacher, a nun, gives the whole class a lecture on the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment, “Thou shalt not steal.” She tells the whole class that before they steal something, ask themselves, “Where is Jesus?” That night the faces of the brothers are downcast at suppertime. Their mother asks them what is wrong. There is a moment of silence. Finally one of them blurts out, “The nun lost her Jesus and she thinks we took him!”

Pain and suffering are like these mischievous brothers. They cause us to “lose our Jesus.” We ask, “Where is God,” when we experience the brokenness of divorce, when someone we love is diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, when a parent dies, when a child develops leukemia, when a child or mother dies at birth.

I believe keeping hamsters and goldfish are good for children. Not just because they teach our children responsibility, but also because they teach our children about death. At the age of seven, I had never had a pet to die. So that Saturday morning when my mother told me my playmate Linda who had been sick for 6 months, that Linda had died from leukemia last night, I did not know what the word “death” meant. I remember visiting in the funeral home. It was difficult for me as a seven year old to see the body of my blonde haired playmate in a casket. I asked where she was, because I did not recognize her. My mother told me God called her to heaven to play with the angels. This did not satisfy me very much then. And it does not satisfy me much today. In fact, it distanced me from a God who might selfishly take away my companion.

We do blame God when we suffer. We say, “It is God’s will.” We say, “God took the baby.” We say, “God does not give us more than we can bear.” I believe God has big

shoulders and can take this responsibility. But there is a problem with blaming God. We label as sociopaths human beings who admit to causing suffering or killing a child. And yet we accuse God of doing just this. There is also a problem with saying “God does not give us more than we can bear.” I had a patient’s wife once tell me she wishes she was less strong so God would have kept her husband safe. We lose our Jesus. And when we lose our Jesus, we lose our hope. Paul says to his scribe, “While we were still weak.” We lose our Jesus, and we become weak. But suffering also isolates us from each other. And isolation causes even more suffering.

There is so much suffering we simply cannot empathize with everyone who endures it. We are lulled into apathy because we think suffering is God’s desire. We distance ourselves from those with suffering. We gloss over suffering by refusing to visit those in the hospital. We gloss over death by telling each other, “He passed,” instead of, “He died.” We say, “When the dog bites, when the bee stings, when we’re feeling sad, we simply remember our favorite things, and then we don’t feel so bad.” That is just not helpful, is it! No wonder those with cancer tell me the thing that stresses them most is not physical pain but isolation. Isolation from God and community cause us to suffer fear and despair. And fear and despair cause even more suffering than physical pain.

But Paul tells the Romans, “God’s love has been poured into your hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to you.”

### **Movement 3: We cannot escape God’s love**

Are we not comforted when someone acknowledges our suffering? The presence of another in our suffering is a gift. Jurgen Moltmann in his book, “Crucified God,” says God is the one who both feels nails in his flesh and at the same time is the parent of a

child who dies. God is present in and feels our pain. Paul says, “God proves his love for us.” So we may lose our Jesus, but Jesus has not lost us. In the dark night of the soul, even if we lose our belief in God, God still believes in us. And when we recognize God’s presence in our pain, God’s Holy Spirit transforms our pain from one of those times when we “lose our Jesus,” into an experience of fellowship with God. But if God’s presence does not always stop our pain, what good is it?

Paul gives Good News to the Romans. Paul says they have “peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ.” The Greek word for peace is the closest the Greek language has to the Hebrew word, “shalom.” And shalom is more than freedom from conflict. Shalom means belonging to community, wholeness, well-being, and flourishing. But how does one move from suffering to shalom?

A mountain climber is overwhelmed at the foot of the summit. She has no hope of reaching her destination until she can find a path to the top. How much more overwhelmed when we are in the midst of our suffering? Jerome Groupman, the author of “Anatomy of Hope,” writes, “There is a profound human need to believe there is a future better than the present. Hope is the ability to see a path to this future.” Paul says Jesus is the hopeful path. In the midst of suffering, “God’s love is poured into your heart,” and “hope does not disappoint.” So I ask, “Is God’s path of hope to move from suffering to shalom seen in the power to eliminate pain? Or instead is God’s path of hope the loving presence which eliminates all loneliness?”

I told one of my patients a few years ago that he had multiple myeloma. This is a painful cancer involving the bones, a cancer which is difficult to cure. After telling him the diagnosis, he said to me, “Doc, I know why I have cancer.” I said, “Tell me more.”

He said, “I have cancer because I’ve been bad.” I took this opportunity to share with him the Good News. I tell him I do not know why he has cancer. But that I am absolutely certain God does not visit suffering on people to either punish or instruct them. I say to him that God loves him. He tells me several years later, that though chemotherapy put his cancer into remission, the most important thing that ever happened in my office was not the chemotherapy, but was when he heard for the first time in his life that God loves him. Good News erases the anxiety and despair resulting from isolation from God and each other.

Paul tells the Romans suffering and hope are related. He says, “suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope.” In the midst of suffering God’s presence gives hope for shalom. And God’s hope allows us to endure pain and even death. God’s presence transforms the hopelessness of Good Friday into the creativity of Easter morning. Because Jesus is both the weakness and strength of God’s love, he could be nailed to wood, could bleed, and could die. God put on the weakness of human flesh so that through Jesus’ suffering, God can reveal the lengths to which God is willing to go. But there is more. Through God’s resurrection of Jesus, God shows us that no one, absolutely no one, is beyond the power of God’s love and reconciliation. That nothing can come between humankind and God’s love. That suffering is not a mark of God’s abandonment. We rejoice, and maybe even boast, for God is indeed present in our suffering, giving us hope in Jesus’ resurrection.

### **Conclusion**

Suffering as a proposed 6th vital sign, losing our Jesus, and God’s eternal presence. Marcus Borg writes about the Celtic Christian tradition of the thin places.

Worship, prayer, and hymns are thin places where we feel God's presence most keenly. And Borg writes we also experience thin places in suffering. My friends, please do an exercise with me. Close your eyes for a moment and take a deep breath. Now blow it out and listen. Your next breath is the closest sign you have that God loves you beyond your understanding and always will. Now breathe in. I mean, really fill your lungs. Now open your eyes. I mean, really open your eyes and look around. All of you know someone besides yourself who is suffering at this very minute. What is preventing you from breathing in God's Holy Spirit, putting on the clothes of Christ, and being present to the one who suffers? What will you say when the one who suffers asks you, "Where is God?"

**Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's people say ... (Amen)**