

Suffering for Good

Genesis 45:1-15

Stories of Genesis: When God Shows Up

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Sunday, September 4, 2005

Worship at 9:00 and 10:45 a.m.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer lived through one of the darkest times in the history of humankind, all the way through the preparation of Nazi Germany and the war, to die at the very end -- executed. His words ring to us as substantive for those times that are beyond our comprehension. We are overwhelmed and devastated by the continual barrage of news from Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana.

I think a right reaction is anger and frustration. I think the temptation is to move into blaming others, making accusations and seeking victims of our own. It is important that we do not react, but that we use the anger for proactivity. It is important that we do not give-in to quick emotional response, but that we give-in to planned and careful, thoughtful response. We have prayerfully begun to think about the ways in which we can encourage you as congregational members to participate. We are not the only source of possibility for investment in how to bring relief and development.

You can participate in literally hundreds of possible ways. When you leave the sanctuary today you will see a table in the Court of Flags in the narthex area that gives you several opportunities if you want to engage in specific operational acts. We encourage you to prayerfully consider those possibilities. I have talked with many people specializing in relief this week, and they say that the number one issue is to realize that initial response is very complicated, demands huge investments, and money is important. We will take a special offering today. The offering can be designated to disaster relief and made out to the church. We will have a special team of people who will consider how those funds will be distributed; many of them will be distributed through the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance funds. We will be seeking ways in which we can partner with other Presbyterian churches and presbyteries that are in the area of the three states devastated. It will be personal, it will be accessible, and it will be strategic. We encourage you to pray for our church and for those states, and for the people who are really struggling, both in difficulty, and in trying to save and relieve.

As it happens, this sermon was going to be on suffering and, as God would have it, there is a lot of suffering we look to today. If you have questions, please do not hesitate to call. We will have people who will respond to you and your questions.

Let us take a moment to bow in prayer before the word we hear from God is proclaimed. Let us pray. Now speak to us the word that you want to speak, powerful God, through Jesus the Christ who came to proclaim good news to the broken-hearted, to those who are held in captivity, to those who are poor, to those who need a cup of cold water and some food. May your Holy Spirit now guide us into action as your word speaks to us. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Excerpts from the following letter are from a doctor who was at the Ritz Carlton hotel in downtown New Orleans when the event occurred: "I am writing this note on Tuesday at 2:00 PM. I wanted to update all of you to the situation here. I don't know how much information that you are getting, but I am certain it is more than we are getting here. Be advised that almost everything I am telling you is from direct observation or rumor from a reasonable source. They are allowing limited Internet access, so I hope to dispatch this today. I'm not sure when I will be able to be in touch again. Personally, my family and I are fine. My family is safe in Jackson, Mississippi, and I am now a temporary resident of the Ritz Carlton Hotel in New Orleans. I figured if this were my time to go, I wanted to go to a place with a good wine list. In addition, this hotel is a very old building on Canal Street that would, and did, sustain little damage. Many of the other hotels sustained significant loss of windows, and we expect that many of the guests may be evacuated here.

"Things were obviously bad yesterday, but today they are much worse. Overnight the water arrived. Now Canal Street, true to its origins, indeed is a canal. The first floor of all downtown buildings is under water.

I have heard that Charity Hospital and Tulane are limited in their ability to care for patients because of water. Ochsner is the only hospital that remains fully functional. However, I spoke with them today and they, too, are on a generator and losing food and water fast. The city now has no clean water, no sewage system, no electricity, and no real communications. Bodies are being recovered floating in the floods. We are worried about cholera. Even the police are without effective communications. We have a group of armed police here with us at the hotel, and they are trying admirably to exert some local law enforcement, but it is tough because looting is now rampant. It is not malicious looting. These are poor and desperate people with no housing, no medical care, and no food or water trying to take care of themselves and their families. Unfortunately, some of the people are armed and dangerous. We hear gunshots frequently. Most of Canal Street is occupied by armed looters who have a low threshold for discharging their weapons. We hear gunshots. The looters are using makeshift boats made of pieces of Styrofoam to access. We are still waiting for significant National Guard presence. The health care situation here has worsened dramatically overnight. Many people in the hotel are elderly, or with small children. There are physicians in this hotel attending the HIV Conference. We have commandeered the world famous French Quarter Bar to turn it into a makeshift clinic. There is a team of about seven doctors and pharmacists, and we anticipate this will be a major medical facility in the central business district.

“Our biggest adventure today was the raiding of the Walgreen’s on Canal Street under police escort. The pharmacy was dark and full of water. We basically scooped the entire drug sets into garbage bags and removed them, all under police escort. The looters had to be held back at gunpoint. After a dose of prophylactic Cipro, I hoped to be fine.”

I could continue reading, but we get the message and the images and the picture; we have been overwhelmed by that. It is important that we, in this moment, have some sense of respite, some sense of quiet in our reflection as to what to do. We’ve had members of our church who are furious, who have called us to say we are doing too little and too late. There is a tremendous fear that we have ignored the black, African American population of these areas, and that we have shown lack of interest for the poor. There is a lot of high emotion, passion, frustration and anger.

As it would happen, the text for today is about Joseph, who was prepared by God, to deal with famine. We are dealing with flood today; that leads to famine for people. Joseph was given a national and international responsibility to do intervention in relief and development for a nation in Egypt and international relationships around Egypt that would keep people safe and fed during seven years of famine. This text that we read today is loaded with emotion. We have Joseph weeping at the beginning of it, and we have Joseph weeping at the end of it. To be personally invested in the struggle, the suffering and the pain, and to have an emotional awareness of what is going on will lead, inevitably, to significant periods of anger, weeping, of sorrow, of asking the questions, and of seeking forgiveness. Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his brothers, had mustered all of those emotions over all of those 13 years in prison, and when he saw his brothers he could not control himself. He was overwhelmed.

As we discussed last week, Joseph’s dreams had turned into nightmares. Today many of the dreams of people in the United States have turned into nightmares. We must ask the question: “Why is this happening?” We could ask the question of why God allows these things to happen; but I think that question is often asked, and it leads us to what is, really, an unanswerable place. The real question, from my perspective, is: What does God expect of us during times of suffering? What moves us to action? Where is God with us in the midst of these terrible times? And why do terrible times happen? What is the relationship between suffering and our responsibility to act?

There is no doubt that, in Joseph’s case, he is in the process of 13 years of imprisonment and suffering because God is preparing him for a significant time of action. The nightmare leads into mission. The misery leads into a maturing readiness to take action. Why does God allow suffering, and why do we suffer? What is it about the heritage of the people of God that makes suffering worthwhile? It is a time of preparation to learn how to be strong and stable so that when we face an opportunity to act, we will have the stuff—the right stuff—to go.

There are many things we could list that Joseph had to face in his pain. He had to face his family, which was very dysfunctional and sold him into slavery. He had to face being thrown into a pit with no water,

and his life being threatened. He was sold by his family to slave traders who sold him into Egypt and slavery. He was sold to Potiphar, a captain of pharaoh's guard. He was seduced and tempted by Potiphar's wife and, because he rebuffed her advances, he was thrown into prison. In prison, he befriended people and led well; but people forgot about him and left him there. It went on for 13 years. He had to ask the question: "Why?"

At the end of the 13 years, we find Joseph meeting with his brothers. And the answer to the question "Why?" is because God wanted to preserve life. Why do you suffer? Why do I suffer? And why is there great suffering in the world among people of faith? Because God is trying to work in us to have the energy, ability, discipline and maturity to preserve life when it comes to that. It is important that – rather than getting into a reactive pattern when all hell breaks loose – we answer the question of who are we becoming in the midst of the tension.

There are many ways in which we suffer. We suffer in postponement, a sense of abandonment, physical pain, terrible traumas, injustice or poverty, or unemployment. We can identify personally with many of the issues of suffering through which these people are going in the three disaster-ridden states. Why? Why the misery? Two great passages, one in chapter 45 and one in chapter 50 of Genesis, summarize it that we are going through a difficult time like Joseph, because God wants to preserve life, not destroy it. In chapter 50, Joseph told his brothers, "Even though you intended to do me harm and intentionally sold me into slavery, I forgive you, because God meant it for good."

Now, if Joseph had gotten himself into an unending cycle of revenge and vindictiveness in prison, and had chosen to hide the meanness of his brothers in the darkness of his soul, where do you think Egypt would have been when it was all said and done?

No, because he was willing to go with the pain and see himself as an instrument of God in the midst of the darkness, and not hold on to the vindictiveness and the blame and the attack, he was able to do something of substantive good when he got out. The series of setbacks launched him into a sequence of sudden boosts of energy to intervene on behalf of an entire world in famine. Misery, and what we go through in the misery, can either undo us or lead us into maturity. It's who you are becoming while you are suffering that counts. It's whether or not you believe that God is with you and God is good in the midst of that, and that God is helping you walk through it. It may take months and years, it may take a lifetime to work it through, but the question is: Who are you becoming? Are you ready to break out and serve other people because of what you have experienced with the presence of God in the darkest places?

Joseph developed spiritual discipline. He keeps the faith that God is good. He holds onto the dream even in the midst of the nightmare; he does excellent work even in the midst of his imprisonment. He builds trust, he grows relationships; he develops strong stewardship skills, and he becomes a great manager in the midst of prison. If one is able to grow in maturity in the midst of pain, then good can come of it, because God inevitably will call us into mission. Out of 13 years of imprisonment, Joseph is invited to lead the world to deal with famine.

One of the questions we are asking as we look at the flood and the hurricane disaster is: "Where are the leaders who can help us deal with the immensity of this problem?" And let me tell you, God has prepared some. It is so easy to go after a few and to attack them, and to miss the reality that God has prepared another entire group of people to be able to minister and lead us in this difficult time.

What can happen for good in the midst of the bad? The dream can live on in the pain. Goodness touches people while they are in the darkness. Goodness brings light into abusive patterns. Goodness matures the suffering person. Goodness dismantles the hate, the rage and the vengeance. Goodness brings grace. God is good, and God is acting with us when we are in the midst of the devastation.

Now, there are those who refuse to have God with them in the midst of it. And for those people, they are not going to be of much value when all is said and done. We have a choice to make: Will we be in the dark place with God, or are we going to become resentful? If we are becoming resentful, we will be of no help when all hell breaks loose. So the call for us today is to become people who build deeply and in deep foundational rootedness into the presence of God when life is really hard. That maturity is developed in

the fiery furnace, in the heat-treated environment where we become hardened and toughened and galvanized. We become tempered and purified to have a focus. We are purged of lesser things. We are pruned back, and we are now buffed to act.

Are you buffed to act? The purpose in the suffering is to let go of our personal agendas, to embrace a divine agenda. And that is what the call is today for all of us who are watching how to respond to the disaster – to learn and practice the disciplines of life and faith even when things are dark, to build a determination that has God at the center so that we become excellent in small things – so that when the big thing comes, we know how to act.

God is in the midst of all this. God wants to speak personally to each one of us and call us to action – responsible action. It is important that we can see goodness in the midst of the pain. God is here to correct the injustice, to bring equity to inequity, to fill out the naiveté, ignorance and arrogance, and to show us goodness. We have, out of disinterest, ignored some of the things that helped cause the disaster. It's time to pay attention. All of this is pointed directly in the good news of Jesus Christ who came specifically, according to the gospel of Luke, to speak good news to the poor and the broken-hearted.

Today is our opportunity, as mature people being led into mission, to speak good news to the poor and the broken-hearted. It is a time when we will see the worst and the best. May our church be known for its response to the good news, and may we see the best. Therefore, I invite you to pray. Pray for those who would serve the living God in the midst of this disaster. Pray for those who are hurting. Pray for there to be careful, planned and good response, and for the energy to be proactive, not reactive.

So we will end this sermon time with a call to prayer and action. Let us pray together: O Lord, help us to be people of prayer now. We pray for those who are in devastation. Call us to invest ourselves and our money, our time and energy and our imagination and creativity. Help us to make plans that are good plans, and to work with those who know how to accomplish them. Help us to be involved with teams of people who are well-led and trained. Help us to focus on the good things that we see and not dwell on the bad, and attack. Help us to build partnerships with agencies and churches that can help us focus and do well. Give us a passion for active intervention, and lead this into a longer-term mission for your people. Help us to admit our mistakes, address poverty, and come up with a new nurturing attitude towards creation, to hear this wake-up call. May your goodness and mercy flood us, and may we have the discipline out of our own experience of pain to go into mature mission. Through Jesus Christ, in whom we pray. Amen.