

The Suffering God – Ben Wayman

Job 38:1-7, 34-41; Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35c; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45

I missed Tyler's sermon last week, but I read it. It's wonderful. It's so good, in fact, that I want to remind us of his key point, illustrated so well by the book, *If You Give a Moose a Muffin*. Tyler pointed out that the demands of love are endless. As soon as we open ourselves to love—we give a moose a muffin—we open ourselves to a cascade of demands. Last week, Tyler showed us that Jesus is the Moose. This week, we're the Moose. When God created the world, he gave us moose a muffin. And we have been placing the demands of love on God ever since.

So let's start with Job. I don't know what to make of Job. There are so many things about this story that don't sit well for me: a cruel game constructed by God and the Satan; innocent suffering; a story ending no parent would ever agree is a happy one. Even God's response to Job out of the whirlwind (I'm God and you're not)—while true, not even that sits well, because it seems to dismiss Job's suffering. You should all know up front: the book of Job leaves me puzzled about suffering and the God who allows it to happen.

I'm sure my confusion is due to a lack of imagination on my part. It may be that I just haven't read Job carefully enough or come across the right commentary that unlocks the whole thing. Or maybe I lack the righteousness necessary to be satisfied with God's answer at the end, as Job is. It's probably all of these things.

But today, you're stuck with me, and so we'll just have to make do with what we have.

This morning, I'd like to propose that God's answer to suffering is Jesus. If this is true, then this is both good news and bad news. The bad news is that God's answer to suffering is not what we would have chosen. The good news is that it's much more. But in order for us to see this, we need help from our scripture lessons. Let's go back to Job.

Job plunges us into the depths of real suffering. All ten of Job's kids have died because of a desert windstorm, and his servants have been killed. Formerly a man of massive wealth and resources, Job's property and assets have all been taken or consumed by fire from heaven. And if this all wasn't enough, Job has been inflicted with a skin disease that makes him socially repulsive, and hardly recognizable to his friends. Job's long focus on suffering reminds us how fragile our lives really are.

But we try everything we can to protect ourselves from suffering. The thing is, no matter how careful we are, we cannot protect loved ones or even ourselves from misfortune. Despite our endless attempts to keep suffering at bay with health coverage, savings accounts, prescription medicines, and insurance policies, we will all die.

Some of us need to hear this: we will all die. We are all fragile. We will all suffer. Suffering is inescapable—no matter how good or righteous or careful you are. This is an

important reminder, especially for those of us who think that if we play our cards right, we may just get out of this life alive. And it's Job who gives us this great reminder.

But where Job fails us is that it's not at all clear whether God cares about our suffering. What's maddening about suffering is not just that it's unpleasant, but it seems so contrary to the goodness of God. Where is God in the midst of suffering? The book of Job gives us the impression that God's much too preoccupied with the rest of creation to worry about human suffering.

Now I'd like to speak for a moment to those of you who have experienced deep suffering. Maybe you're in the thick of it right now and feel like you can hardly breathe. Here's what you need to hear today: God *cares* about your suffering. God cares about your suffering and God cares about you so much that God enters into your suffering at its steepest drop-off.

This is good news. And it's here that Jesus comes in. So to remind you of how I'm using Tyler's sermon from last week: we are the moose this week and God has responded to our demands of love by embracing us with Jesus. Jesus is God's answer to our suffering.

In our gospel reading today the disciples are on the road to Jerusalem. Jesus has just shared with his disciples for the third and final time that when he gets to Jerusalem he will be betrayed, condemned, mocked, spit on, flogged, and killed. And then, after enduring suffering and death, he will rise again.

Today's reading comes on the heels of this prophecy, which is what makes James and John's demand so bizarre. It's as if they spaced out for all the betrayal, suffering, and murder stuff and only heard that last bit about rising again. James and John's demand completely ignores Jesus' prophecy about his upcoming suffering. For them, suffering is unthinkable for a glorified messiah. Like Job's demand that God give an account for his suffering, they demand Jesus hook them up with some extra glory.

The rest of the disciples are infuriated because the Zebedee brothers beat them to the punch. Before we start bashing the disciples, though, we should acknowledge that we do the same thing. Every time we suffer, we demand God give us an account for our suffering. We see suffering as totally unrelated to the glory of God. When we mourn the loss of a loved one, or despair of a chronic condition, when we rage against God for innocent suffering or senseless tragedy, we join the disciples who cannot see that in Jesus God suffers.

For the earliest Christians this was a mistake of categories. By definition, God cannot suffer. God is immortal. God cannot change. God. Does. Not. Suffer. Ever. But in Jesus, God reveals the divine response to suffering. In Jesus, God takes on our human nature and suffering, showing us that God does not dismiss our suffering. No. God's response to suffering is to enter into it because that's where we are, and that's what love demands.

We worship a God who suffers. In Jesus, God suffers with us. In Jesus, God suffers for us. In Jesus, God opens God's self to suffering for the demands of love. God takes on suffering for our sake. Christians are not protected from suffering—as much as we wish we were. But Christians *can* face suffering boldly because God is with us and for us, and because of this, we don't need to fear death. We are able to drink the cup of suffering Jesus drank and be baptized with the death Jesus endured. Jesus showed us how to be obedient to God even when we're suffering. And he shows us it's possible to live a fully human life and not be overthrown by our suffering.

And there's more.

It's not just that God loves us so much that in Jesus God enters into our suffering. The good news is that in Jesus, God suffered so that through our suffering and death, we will rise with him. Here's the gospel: God's answer to suffering is to enter into it and to strip it of its power to tear us away from God. Through his suffering death, Jesus ransomed us from Satan—he set us free—and by this Jesus conquered sin and suffering and death. The letter to the Hebrews teaches us that through Jesus' suffering he has saved us from death. God's answer to suffering is Jesus, who shows us how to follow him through our suffering and into the loving embrace of the God who will not let suffering, or sin, or Satan have the final say.

If God's answer to suffering is not the one we would have expected or chosen, that's because God is God and we're not. Job teaches us that. And what Mark teaches us is that God's answer to suffering is Jesus. In Jesus God suffers and dies and rises from the grave, and through this God conquers Satan who had held us captive in the double chains of sin and suffering. God completely accepts the demands of loving us.

In Jesus, God says Yes to the demands of love by entering into our suffering and stripping it of its power. So the question, *Where is God in the midst of suffering?* is not the one we are left with today. The question that remains to be answered is, *Will you say Yes to God even in your suffering?*