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PASTORAL LETTER – MARCH 18, 2020

Dear friend,

There is a lot of suffering going on in the world, partly created by the Coronavirus.

As people of faith, we ask ourselves, what do we do with our suffering? And, we ask ourselves, where is the blessing, if any, in my suffering?

Before I answer these questions, I would like to take a brief detour in order to remind us that the theme of suffering is prevalent in the liturgical season of Lent. As we know, Lent is marked by a period of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving for Christians; Jesus's suffering on the cross, and the 40-days prior to the promise of renewal ushered in by the Resurrection of the Christ, which we call in our vernacular, Easter.

Now back to my central questions, what do we do with our suffering? And, where is the blessing, if any, in my suffering?

The Christian faith offers us a reassuring response. It reminds us that Jesus is one who is "acquainted with suffering".

The Prophet Isaiah, in one of the more remarkable passages of the Bible, predicted that Jesus would come as a Messiah, and Isaiah describes the coming Messiah as the "suffering servant acquainted with our grief, taking on our infirmities."

When Jesus actually appears as the Messiah, He is kind, sensitive, gentle, tender, compassionate, and empathetic. His words of invitation bring enormous comfort: **"Come unto me, you who have heavy burdens and are weary."** Indeed, He is close to us in our suffering.

So, whatever suffering you are experiencing, Jesus is attuned to your pain, your fear, and your anxiety this very moment. For example, if you feel financially vulnerable, Jesus knew what it

meant to feel worried about not knowing where he was going to spend the night. He once remarked in **Luke 9:58**, “**Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.**” If, for example, you are suffering because you feel abandoned, even abandoned by your own faith, consider how Jesus felt when he once “cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?*’ that is, ‘*My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?*’” (Matthew 27:45 – 46).

As a verbal footnote, Jesus was quoting Psalm 22, which underscores a point that I always stress: it is important for us to develop a relationship with our scriptures for moments in which we are tested. That way we can quote the Bible for strength, guidance, and, in this case, express our raw disappointment with our faith. It is okay to tell God that we feel upset when we are suffering.

Indeed, Jesus is acquainted with our suffering.

Now, regarding the question, what is the blessing in my suffering?

Suffering can help us become aware of something that God is trying to say which we have not heard before. We can become aware of an activity of God that is sometimes hard to understand.

Let me go at this point another way. There is a story that I shared from the pulpit at the Rhinebeck Reformed Church years ago which ties into this point. It is about a little girl named Saatchi, four years old. Young Saatchi’s mother had just brought her new baby brother home from the hospital. Eager to spend some time alone with him, she kept insisting on it. Her parents resisted, thinking she might have feelings of sibling rivalry and might do something to disturb or hurt the child. Her persistence wore them down and they allowed her to go alone into her baby brother’s room. They kept the door open a crack to look in on her.

This is what they saw: little Saatchi leaning over the crib and saying to her brother, “Tell me what God feels like. I’m starting to forget.”

One poem which has helped me come closer to the suffering servant is the one rendered by Francis Thompson, a 19th-century English poet. Thompson, who spent three years homeless and destitute on the streets of London before being recognized for his poetry, wrote *The Hound of Heaven*. Some of the evocative verses from that poem go as follows:

**I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.**

The rest of the poem tells how God’s footsteps: steady, patient, and determined, are following him. Finally, the footsteps reach him and he hears God’s voice. As I read this poem, Thompson is surrendering: “**I am yours, God. Do with me as you will.**”

No matter what we face, the suffering servant, Jesus, understands. No matter where we are, the suffering servant, Jesus, is with us, as Thompson reminds us, every step of the day.

I leave you with the following prayer:

LORD, be with us in our suffering. Lord, help us to come closer and closer to the suffering servant, to the one who is acquainted with our suffering and grief, who has taken on our pain, and leads us forth. Amen.

And with these two other prayers in the form of song *Be Thou My Vision*, and *In Christ Alone* (just tap on these links and the YouTube clips with the songs should appear):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihJAJA4ibEs>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ENtL_li4GbE

Your brother-in-Christ, your friend, and your pastor,
Luis Perez

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