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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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**Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**August 14, 2016**

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## **“How Can a Good God Allow Suffering?”**

*(John 11:1)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of  
Mary and her sister Martha” (John 11:1)*

**COLLECT:** Almighty God, merciful Father, Your thoughts are not our thoughts, Your ways are not our ways. In Your wisdom You permit evil and suffering to befall us. We implore You, let not the hearts of Your people despair nor our faith fail us, but sustain and comfort us. Bring hope and healing in our sufferings, that we may find relief and restoration, through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

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I got to know Josh in the UW-Band. He also played baritone. We were standing on the field after practice. It was September, 1985, and we had just learned of the devastating earth quake in Mexico City. 8.0 on the Richter Scale. Hundreds of buildings collapsed, including a number of hospitals, also the university hospital with 536 beds. In the end, the quake killed over 5,000 people, and several thousand more were seriously injured.

Somewhere in our conversation Josh shook his head and blurted out, "I refuse to believe in a God who allows such suffering." I didn't know what to say. I've had time to think about it since. His assumption was this earthquake was an unnecessary evil. God could have stopped it, but he didn't. According to Josh, the world is full of pointless evil and suffering, suffering from which no good can come. And if we're honest, we often think the same thing. We cannot imagine good coming out of this earthquake, or that disease, or this car wreck. Tucked away in the assumption is this: if the evil appears pointless to me, then it must *be* pointless. But does that really make sense? Just because we cannot see or imagine a good reason why God allows evil and suffering, does that mean there can be no good reason? God surely has thoughts and plans that you and I are not privy to, and could not understand them even if we were.

Isaiah 55, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (v. 8-

9).

Remember the story of Joseph, and how his brothers sold him into slavery? Joseph must have wondered, “Why God? *Why* did you let this happen?” And he had a lot a time to think about it. Remember, Potiphar bought Joseph as a slave. In time, Potipher’s wife wanted to sleep with Joseph. Joseph consistently refused out of loyalty to Potipher and to God. Humiliated, Potifar’s wife accuses Joseph of trying to rape her, so Joseph, for the next two years, finds himself in the slammer doing hard time. Again, he must have been asking, “Why God? What did I do to deserve this? I try to do right, and this is how you reward me?”

But those were not wasted years. God used those years and experiences to strengthen and refine and season Joseph’s character and faith. Because God was with him, Joseph rose up over time and even became a powerful player in Pharaoh’s court. God actually used Joseph to save thousands of lives and even his own family from starvation. Now consider: if God had not allowed Joseph to be sold into slavery and imprisoned, he would have spent his life tending sheep and goats. He never would have become such a powerful agent of good for others. And we also wouldn’t have that remarkable story of painful forgiveness. “You meant it for evil” Joseph told his brothers. “God meant it for good.” Joseph knew God was able to work great good out of their evil act. I suspect there came a time in Joseph’s life when he looked back, and, though he would never want to go through it again, yet he was grateful for that suffering now woven into the fabric of his being.

I think many of you can identify with that. You look back at your own suffering, and though you wouldn’t want to go through it again, you can see how it was a time of personal and spiritual growth. While we are in it, suffering usually feels pointless and evil. Later, however, we can often see how God was with us and worked good through our suffering.

I remember visiting a prisoner in St. Louis. He wasn’t very old but had already lived a rough life. He had

been a selfish and cruel, a drug addict and a dealer. He was the target of a drive-by shooting and was hit multiple times and left for dead on a St. Louis sidewalk. He spent weeks in the ICU, and then years in prison. He lifted his shirt and showed me some of the scars and took my hand and had me feel a pronounced little bump under the skin of his cheek bone. It was a bullet that was still lodged there that the doctors, for whatever reason, chose not to remove. He was in prison, but he was alive and clean of drugs and looking forward to getting out and finding work and living again. He was actually grateful. “It was an awful price to pay” he told me, “but I thank God it happened.”

In our Gospel lesson, we have another account where everyone seems to be asking, “Where was God?” It happens in a village called Bethany. According to John, Lazarus, Martha and Mary were among the best friends Jesus had. He stayed with them on numerous occasions. Who can forget the time when Martha worked herself into an angry lather while her sister Mary sat at the feet of Jesus?

In any case, when Lazarus became deathly ill, the sisters send word to Jesus. The messenger tracks Jesus down and delivers the message. The messenger returns, but Jesus does not. Why? Lazarus is a good man and a friend. Would it not be reasonable to assume Jesus would try to be there for them? Lazarus’ condition rapidly declines. Still, no Jesus. Then, Lazarus slips into the dying process, and the sisters feel helpless. Maybe they take turns through the night, holding vigil, mopping his forehead, telling the sleeping man Jesus will come soon. But he doesn’t. Whenever Martha and Mary hear voices or footsteps outside they think maybe it’s him! But it never is. And when Lazarus finally dies the sisters can hardly believe it.

Neighbors, well-wishers, friends from Jerusalem . . . they all start converging on that little house in Bethany. But Jesus, he’s conspicuous by his absence. A day after his death, Jesus doesn’t come. Two days, three days . . . still no Jesus. When Lazarus has already been in the tomb for four days, finally Jesus saunters in to Bethany,

Did the sisters notice? Martha goes out to meet him, but Mary doesn't. Scripture records no greeting. Martha simply says to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Later, Martha retrieves Mary still within the house, and again, no greeting. Mary says the very same thing. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." The women have measured their words (which is admirable), but the resentment is almost palpable. In fact, my guess is they're peeved. I think what they really want to say is, "Lord, you weren't that far away! And he was your friend! What could have been so important?" Notice, the people from Bethany are also aware of the apparent indifference. In verse 37, they're asking each other, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Earlier, when Jesus had first heard the message that Lazarus was ill, he told his disciples, "This sickness . . . is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." So we as readers know that Jesus has some sort of plan in mind, but no one in Bethany knows this. All they know is that Jesus didn't come. They're all asking the same question we often ask: "Where was God?" And there's at least a chance one or more might be thinking, "There was no good reason for this death. Therefore either Jesus isn't good or Jesus isn't God." Or, in the words of Josh, "I refuse to believe in a God who would allow this."

In any event, no one is anticipating good to come out of this. Even when Jesus walks to the tomb and tells them to roll back the stone, Martha says, "No, Lord . . . the stench! It's been four days." No one is expecting good to come out of Lazarus' death. They cannot even imagine the possibilities . . . not until they hear the words, "Lazarus, come out!"

There are times when you and I cannot even imagine the possibilities for why our good and all-powerful God allows what feels like pointless suffering. Could it be God has reasons we cannot know or understand? In fact, (and this is important), to think we should be able to figure out

God's reasons for suffering exposes our assumption that God isn't much smarter than we are, or that we are about as smart as he is. Said another way, to think we should always be able to figure out why God allows suffering can be called idolatry.

Sometimes with my 8<sup>th</sup> grade confirmands I'll ask them to make two fists with their hands [thumbs out, knuckles together]. Doctors say that's the approximate size of your brain. "Do you expect to plumb the depths of God's mind within so small a space?"

"I refuse to believe in a God who allows such suffering". Imagine, a sophomore in college still plagued by zits and pimples, all puffed up and self-righteous, plopping himself down in a judgment seat over God. But we do that too. "Where was God?" we ask. Why did you let it happen?" Often with those questions, we're not really interested in answers. We're more interested in demanding God to justify himself before us. Job crossed that line. Remember?

He had lost everything . . . family, friends, wealth, health, property. It was all taken from him. The first 37 chapters are full of blustery and windy words from Job and his friends wondering why. Why did you do it God? For 37 chapters the Lord remains silent. Finally, in chapter 38, the Lord speaks. "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself. Now I'm going to question you. Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me if you understand. Surely you know!" (Job 38:1ff). The Lord floods Job with a long string of questions, 41 by my count. And to each of these, Job must simply plead ignorance of God's inscrutable ways. Having no answers to the 41, Job vows to be silent. But the Lord's not yet finished. He asks of Job eighteen more questions, the first of which is, "Would you condemn me to justify yourself?" Job gets the message and confesses his sin. "I have uttered what I did not understand."

Do you see what the Lord is doing? He's saying to Job and us, "There's more going on than you can understand.

You're going to have to trust me on that. Don't accuse me of evil or injustice or indifference or impotence. Trust me."

Finally, a person might say, "So what? I'm still angry. All this doesn't get the Christian God off the hook for the world's evil and suffering!" In response I would simply say the Christian God came to earth to deliberately put himself *on* the hook of human suffering. Jesus didn't walk away from it. He willingly entered it. And no man has experienced anything like the suffering he did. Torture? Check. Betrayal? Check. Hatred? Unfair trial? Condemned as guilty though perfectly innocent? Check! And remember who he was. If a co-worker turns on you and criticizes and condemns you, it's painful. If someone you're dating does that, it's qualitatively more painful. If your spouse does this to you, or a parent does this to you when you're still a child, the psychological damage is immeasurably worse. We cannot fathom, however, what it meant for Jesus to lose the infinite love of the Father that Jesus had from all eternity. But that's what happened on the cross. No longer beloved Son, but now guilty and damnable and feeling the white-hot center of the Father's wrath. Why? Jesus bore, as the substitute in our place, the agonizing exclusion from God that we deserved. He suffered for *our* sins so that someday he can put an end to evil and suffering without putting an end to us.

So let's ask again, "How can a good God allow suffering?" Because of the cross we know what the answer isn't. It cannot be because he doesn't love us. It cannot be because he's indifferent to us. It cannot be because he's unwilling or unable to intervene for us. The truth is God so loves us, and he takes our suffering *so* seriously that he willingly assumes it on himself.

You and I may never know the reason why he allows it in our lives, but because of Christ we can face suffering with hope and trust rather than bitterness and despair. And remember, the Christian witness is never stronger than when we're suffering. Suffering will give you opportunities, one after another, to testify to the hope you have in Christ. There's a certain street credibility that sufferers have when they point to

Jesus as their hope.

And when you're in the thick of it, when it feels like you're going to be crushed by the weight of it, remember: God loves you dearly. He has suffered for you, and he is even now preparing a home for you in heaven. Amen.