

Suffering and Hope  
2 Corinthians 4:7-12  
Job 19:23-27  
February 22, 2017

Suffering.

Hope.

What is the connection between them? Is there such a thing as hopeful suffering?

Will hope Teflon-coat suffering making it easier to endure?

Can hope strengthen the chances of cure?

Does death make a mockery of hope or does hope transcend death?

Is hope something that's worth growing?

These are some of humanity's most perplexing and mind-disturbing challenges.

Add Christ's torturous suffering and death along with his miraculous resurrection to the conversation and it's all the more confounding-- Is suffering good for something... for the rest of us?? What does it mean to suffer with Christ? Did Jesus suffer *for* your sins or because of your sins? And did his suffering accomplish their erasure? Or is the cross about something else? (We won't get to all that this morning!)

Twenty five some years ago at a church conference in El Paso I had opportunity to cross into Juarez and visit a Roman Catholic Church. I saw something there I had never seen before: a wounded, bleeding Jesus statue encased in a glassed in coffin. I was both horrified and intrigued as I observed Mexican men and women bowing and kneeling in prayer as they gazed

upon that gruesome figure. Later I learned that especially marginalized people who have also suffered under oppressive regimes deeply identify with and gain strength from seeing Jesus, God's SON's wounds. "Ah, this Savior understands me, and my pain! AND went on to rise above it!" How do you respond to such a figure here, today?

What is the relationship between Hope and Suffering?

I want to share with you three stories—each illuminating the relationship between Suffering and Hope.

My friend Susan's daughter Patty was diagnosed at age 11, it's been three years now, with both Crohn's disease and Rheumatoid arthritis- related autoimmune syndromes. Joint pain, has limited her mobility, severe intestinal inflammation and the indignities of needing to live near a bathroom have interrupted her young adolescent life. Patty suffers. Her family suffers alongside her.

I was visiting with Susan on Thursday and lamented that my sermon writing wasn't going well. "What gives you hope?" I asked her, knowing about Patty's condition. "My faith" she responded matter-of-factly. "What would you want to hear from your pastor about suffering and hope" I continued. "Well", she said, that's really difficult." Then abruptly she said, "Tell them what not to say!" When I asked permission to share this story Susan sent back Patty's requests: "Don't treat me differently and feel sorry for me.

Don't try to come up with the right thing and say something inspirational and Biblical. Just sit with me when I'm having a bad day— Tell me you know this sucks.

Don't try to fix it.”

Hope comes from being treated like a teenager.

Friends and strangers tell Susan that suffering is God's will for Patty.

That doesn't give her hope.

Christian friends tell her that something good will come out of it.

That doesn't give her hope either.

Then Susan related a conversation she had with her daughter on the way back from Ann Arbor where the U of M had offered a new and promising medication but which carried a high risk of developing a devastating cancer. Susan was reluctant for her daughter to take such a medication, but Patty thought otherwise.

“Mom, if I get three or four good years and then get cancer and die, that's better than feeling this lousy for a long time”. And so, she's on the medication and she's stable.

Susan told me that she has accepted that her daughter will probably die young... younger than any parent would want for her child. But she went on. “I find hope in knowing that I will see her again. I have eternal hope”. (more on that next week)

+++

Now we turn to a very different circumstance of suffering and Hope: In his book *Dare We Speak of Hope*, Alan Boesak, theologian and South African Dutch Reformed Church pastor, anti-apartheid activist politician, introduces his readers to “Francis”, a black servant in Bristol, England. (p. 24) Francis was transported probably from Africa, maybe from the Caribbean to England, against her will and was forced to live as a slave, among the poorest of the poor, “hewers of wood and drawers of water”..

As she was dying she sent a message to her Christian worshiping community, suffering slaves like herself. Her words have endured almost 400 years: “Tell them not to lose *ye glory of God* in their families, neighbourhoods or places where God casts them”.

Francis participated with others like her in faith-rooted resistance to injustice. She believed the “glory of God” rested in the truth that God loves everyone equally, intends dignity for everyone. To submit, to acquiesce to the suffering of slavery would be to “lose the glory of God” to abandon God’s intentions, that is, God’s continuing struggle for and with the world. I sense that hope for Francis came from a strong conviction that God was in her corner, and that’s where she would remain—in God’s! Resisting what God resists; embracing what God embraces. (I hear in her words the words of Paul. )

Her last words are not mumbling platitudes, they are empowering, encouraging words of hope and life.

Alan Boeksak comments, “We need Hope, not just to fight the battle to survive, but to fight the battle beyond survival, to secure life, not for ourselves so much as for others who are not able to fight at all.”

+++

And a third story:

I met 28 year old Dutch Etty Hillesum, through her wartime diaries and letters which record not only her spiritual awakening as a Jew who came to embrace Christian philosophy, but also her approach to the unthinkable suffering she witnessed in the 1940's under Nazi occupation. Rather than go into hiding, Etty trained in Law, coming from a scholarly family, accepted work as a typist with the Jewish Council, eventually voluntarily transferring to a department of "Social Welfare for People in Transit" at the Westerbork transit camp near Drenthe. It was from this transit camp that cargo trains departed for Auschwitz. Rather than understanding her work as assisting the Nazis she saw it as suffering with and offering comfort to those who were merely, ahead of her in line to the "final solution".

Etty met suffering in constant dialogue with God as seen in her diary and letters. She refused to succumb to its darkness, choosing to see the light of meaning and even beauty in the world:

"Dear God, these are anxious times. Tonight for the first time I lay in the dark with burning eyes as scene after scene of human suffering passed before me. One thing is becoming increasingly clear to me..., that we safeguard that little place of You, God, in ourselves. And perhaps in others as well. Alas, there doesn't seem to be much You Yourself can do about our circumstances, about our lives. Neither do I hold You responsible. You can not help us, but we must help You and defend Your dwelling place inside us to the last. There are, it is true, some who, in this late state, are putting their vacuum cleaners and silver forks and spoons in safekeeping instead of guarding You, dear God. And there are those who want to put their bodies in safekeeping but who are nothing more now than a shelter for a thousand fears and

bitter feelings, And they say “I shan’t let them get me into their clutches” but they forget that no one is in their clutches who is in Your arms.”

(Her hope is in God, yes, but not in a God who rescues, but in a God who holds, protects, and whom she will defend!)

Etty offers a stunning universal perspective on suffering:

“Out of all these uniforms one has been given a face now. There will be other faces, too, in which we shall be able to read something we understand: that German soldiers suffer as well. There are no frontiers between suffering people and we must pray for them all.” (Book 10 3 July ’42)

Etty as a poet and a mystic connects hope and suffering in this way:

“The jasmine behind my house has been completely ruined by the rains and storms of the last few days; its white blossoms are floating about in muddy black pools on the low garage roof. But somewhere inside me the jasmine continues to blossom undisturbed, just as profusely and delicately as ever it did and it spreads its scent round the House in which You dwell, oh God. .. I shall bring You all the flowers I shall meet on my way and truly there are many of those. I shall try to make You at home always.”

As the inevitability of her own departure to the death camps nears, as her family joins her at the transit camp as “residents” she reflects on death in this way:

“I have already died a thousand deaths in a thousand camps. I know it all and I do no longer get upset over new information. Somehow I already know it all. And still I find this life beautiful and full of meaning, every minute of it.”

As the war intensified and quotas for transport trains increased, Etty and her family were no longer protected by Etty’s employer, the Jewish Council, and the family on 7th September 1943 were loaded onto a cargo train: destination Auschwitz. She threw a final postcard written to a friend in Amsterdam, Christine, from the overcrowded transport train. It was retrieved by a farmer outside the Westerbork camp:

“September 7, 1943: Dear Christine, opening the Bible at random I find this: ‘The Lord is my high tower.’” I am sitting on my rucksack in the middle of a full freight car. Father, Mother, and Mischa are a few cars away. In the end, the departure came without warning. On sudden special orders from The Hague we left the camp singing. Father and Mother firmly and calmly, Mischa too. We shall be traveling for three days. Thank you for all your kindness and care. Friends left behind will still be writing to Amsterdam, perhaps you will hear something from them. Or from my first long letter from camp. Good bye for now from the four of us.

Etty’s parents died on route or immediately upon arrival at Auschwitz. Etty died November 30 of that year.

Suffering and Hope: in Chronic Disease: Patty says, “Hope lives when you see me, not my suffering. Her mother Susan’s words: My hope is eternal.”

Suffering and Hope: In Slavery’s Oppression, Francis says, “Hope lives with the glory, the intentions of God: we will resist injustice and its suffering together.”

Suffering and Hope: In Genocide, Etty Hillesum says, " Hope resides in beauty and freely offered compassion with others."

Suffering and Hope. Job, Jesus, Paul. You. Me. Suffering's relationship with hope is personal. And spiritual. And diverse. From each other we can be inspired at the tenacity of what humans can abide., but we're in dangerous territory when we tell someone what it suffering should look like or how they should behave. Best hold the mystery lightly, to listen to suffering's many voices and hold one another's hands .... And God's.