

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
November 14, 2010
Luke 21:5-19 and Isaiah 65:17-25

We're talking about suffering today, and some of it's going to be a downer for a while, but bear with me; it gets better in the end. People ask, "why do we suffer?" In some ways, it's an unanswerable question. It is not uncommon for a clergy person who is asked that question to start unfurling all sorts of fancy theological concepts, when what the suffering person really needs is a hug. I have made that mistake myself.

At other times, though, people are genuinely looking for a real answer to that question. It seems to me that there are three causes of humanity's suffering: one is fallen suffering, two is natural suffering, and three is Jimmy Buffett suffering.

The first, fallen suffering, includes the suffering that results from cruelty, abuse, exploitation, greed, corruption, human trafficking, prejudice, injustice, humiliation, torture, genocide, and all the other forms of sin and evil that exist in our fallen world. When we come face to face with the horrifying ways in which human beings can victimize and destroy people, we do get the sense that something demonic is at work. Across the world, there are plenty of examples of people who suffer intensely because of the sins of others. Those who have the courage to speak out on behalf of those who suffer are often those who are martyred in the process. That suffering is also the result of sin and evil in a fallen world.

In addition to fallen suffering, we also have natural suffering. This is the kind of suffering that is not the result of evil or sin. It is the kind of suffering that just happens because we live in physical bodies, and physical bodies are subject to injury, illness, and mortality. God has given us souls that are durable enough to last forever, but our souls are dressed in temporary bodies that wear out like clothes. This is true of every part of our body. We often talk about the interactions between the mind and the body, and it is easy to lose sight of the fact that our brain is not just something that interacts with our body; our brain is a bodily organ itself. It is an organ in which precise electrical impulses and complex chemical reactions often function in stunningly intricate and exquisite balances, but it remains a bodily organ that is subject to chemical imbalances and to the effects of the aging process, just as every other bodily organ is. When any part of our

body is subject to injury or illness, it is certainly painful and sad, but natural suffering isn't anyone's fault. The answer to the question "why me?" is "because you are part of humanity." Some people experience natural suffering earlier in life, some later. While we see some people whose suffering in life seems milder than our own, it is also helpful to keep in mind that there are many people whose natural suffering in life is far, far worse.

After fallen suffering and natural suffering, the third kind of suffering is the one described by Jimmy Buffett in the final line of the song "Margaritaville": "Some people claim that there's a woman to blame, but I know it's my own damn fault." There is some suffering that we cannot blame on the sin of others, or on the forces of nature, because we realize we have brought it on ourselves. It seems odd to be looking for deep theological meaning in the gratuitous use of mild profanity in a drinking song. However, I think the phrase "it's my own damn fault" conveys pretty accurately a sense that we got some kind of cosmic punishment because, well, we deserved it. The use of the word "damn" there seems pretty much on target. At the beginning of the song we hear, "some people claim that there's a woman to blame, but I know it's nobody's fault," then in the middle we hear, "some people claim that there's a woman to blame but I think that it could be my fault" and the realization "it's my own damn fault" doesn't come until the very end of the song.

It is not always immediately obvious which of the three causes of suffering is at work. Is it fallen suffering? "Some people claim that there's a woman to blame." Is it natural suffering? "I know that it's nobody's fault." Or is it the Jimmy Buffett kind of suffering? "I know it's my own damn fault." Sometimes, of course, there is more than one cause at work in a situation.

So all of that brings us to today's gospel passage. Jesus is talking about suffering and he is telling his disciples, "You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name." Are there times in which Christians endure betrayal, hatred, and persecution because of their faith? Yes, there certainly are. Those are examples of fallen suffering, that comes as a result of evil and sin in the world. Does that mean that every single time a Christian is hated it is because they are suffering for their faith? Of course not. Sometimes people who are convinced that they are rejected because they are being

persecuted for the sake of truth and righteousness and all that's holy are, in reality, being pompous twits. And I say this as someone who has been a "righteous" pompous twit myself quite a few times. Things can go the opposite way too: we can carry heavy loads of guilt or inadequacy for years thinking that we deserve the treatment we get, when in reality the mistreatment is the result of the other person's meanness or other sins. Or the harsh treatment or destructive behavior may be caused by something that is not a sin, but simply something gone awry in the person's physical body.

So today's scriptures contain reassurance that suffering does not always mean that there is something deeply wrong with you. Today's scriptures contain reassurance that the suffering of our physical bodies does not last forever. And the good news of the gospel is that even in the times when suffering is our own damn fault, God offers us something far better than damnation.

Teachings about heaven can certainly be presented in ways that are cheap or manipulative. For example, heaven can be presented as a bribe to try to make people behave the way you want them to, or it can be presented as a way to try to persuade people that because injustice doesn't exist in heaven they should tolerate injustice on earth. That idea has never really made any sense to me. I think the opposite is true, that Jesus' teachings about heaven enable us to glimpse the existence of the goal, so that we don't get bogged down in the suffering and we can keep working toward it. Maybe what Jesus is telling us is, "we'll have some suffering today, and some of it's going to be a downer for a while, but bear with me; it gets better in the end. As Jesus puts it, "by your endurance you will gain your souls."

God offers us a future in which we do not have to continue our conflicts anymore. God offers us a future in which all the things that separate us and make relationships difficult can be a distant memory. As today's reading from Isaiah describes it, "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox."

That vision may be hard to hold onto in the middle of the suffering of the moment. There is a lot of truth in the saying that old age is not for sissies. In the endurance of the sufferings and losses that add up over the years, God has gifts for us. The novelist Frederich Buechner has written an autobiography entitled Now and Then in which he reflects on the title character of a novel he has written called Godric. Buechner writes,

“As the years go by, Godric outlives, or is left behind by, virtually everybody he has ever loved—his sister Burcwen, his shipmate Roger Mouse, the two snakes, Tune and Fairweather, who for years were his constant companions, and the beautiful maid, Gillian...But, although not without anguish, he is able to let them all go finally and to survive their going. His humanity and wit survive. His faith survives. He prays. He sins. He dreams. And one day not long before his death—bathing in the icy waters of the river Wear as for years he has bathed there, summer and winter, to chasten his flesh—he feels his arms and legs go numb, his pulse all but stop, and speaks these words both for himself and also for me: “Praise, praise!” I croak. Praise God for all that’s holy, cold, and dark. Praise him for all we lose, for all the river of the years bears off. Praise him for stillness in the wake of pain. Praise him for emptiness. And as you race to spill into the sea, praise him yourself, old Wear. Praise him for dying and the peace of death.”

As Buechner approaches old age himself, he reflects on the things he is still unsure of. Then he says, “And yet there are some things I would be willing to bet maybe even my life on. That life is grace, for instance—the givenness of it, the fathomlessness of it, the endless possibilities of its becoming transparent to something extraordinary beyond itself. That—as I picked up somewhere in Jung and whittled into the ash stick I use for tramping around through the woods sometimes, *vocatus atque non vocatus Deus aderit*, which I take to mean that in the long run, whether you call on him or don’t call on him, God will be present with you. That if we really had our eyes open, we would see that all moments are key moments. That he who does not love remains in death. That Jesus is the Word made flesh who dwells among us full of grace and truth. On good days I might add a few more to the list. On bad days it’s possible there might be a few less. Beyond that, all I can do with real assurance is once more to echo my old teacher Paul Tillich to the effect that here and there even in our world and now and then even in ourselves, we catch glimpses of a New Creation, which, fleeting as those glimpses are apt to be, give us hope both for this life and for whatever life may await us later on. “What’s lost is nothing to what’s found,” as Godric says, “and all the death that ever was, set next to life, would scarcely fill a cup.”