



Sermon – Accepting Suffering
The Rev. Anthony Estes, Associate Rector
The Second Sunday in Lent
February 28, 2021

Readings: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Romans 4:13-25
Psalm 22:22-30
Gospel: Mark 8:31-38

I want to talk to you this morning about *accepting suffering*.

A few years ago, I was in the Diocese of Atlanta, and I was attending their Annual Convocation (which is what we call in our diocese “Annual Convention”). The bishop, Bishop Wright, was addressing the delegates there and was talking about the initiative that the diocese had taken up to try to get the governor of Georgia to expand Medicaid in that state.

They were having a series of protest movements that they were calling “Moral Mondays” at the state capitol. And I was sitting there, and I remember Bishop Wright talking and he was saying:

“And you know we’re going to try and get Medicaid expanded” and the group was saying, *“Yah!”*

“And we’re going protest and do whatever it takes to let them know that is about God and this is about the kingdom.” “Yah!”

“And we’re willing to even get arrested, if that what it takes.”

Wait.

It got real quiet.

You see, Bishop Wright...was willing to experience the suffering of being arrested...for doing what he thought was right.

Suffering for doing what is right, as noble as an idea that it sounds like, is hard to do.

In our gospel today, Jesus tells the disciples — frankly, plainly, openly — that the Son of Man must...suffer. This statement illustrates and introduces the first element of real tension in the relationship between Jesus and his disciples.

You see, Peter has just verbalized only a few moments ago that Jesus was the Messiah, that he was more than just some charismatic preacher, he was the one foretold by the prophets of old that would save the descendants of Abraham; that would save the children of Israel from all of their enemies; that would usher in a new era, a new kingdom. But if Jesus was the one to do that, he couldn't do it if he was dead.

But, yet, that is exactly is what Jesus said.

Jesus dashes their hopes and their expectations of him and tells them that the only way that he can accomplish his mission...is to suffer...that he must play the full role of the Son of Man, which means...suffering wrongly for acting rightly or righteously.

He says, *"It is necessary."*

For Jesus to do the thing that he is called to do — it was necessary for him to suffer many things, to experience rejection and denial from the Pharisees and the chief priests and the scribes, the interpreters of the law.

What compounded that suffering is that it was the religious institutions...it was those powers that *should* have recognized him, who should have been cheering him on! But they could not. They would not. They did not.

The suffering was further compounded by the empire's act to criminalize and punish a man for simply claiming the authority of a kingdom that wasn't even from this world.

But just as it was necessary for him to suffer, that suffering becomes a context for resurrection.

As Gregory of Nazianzus says, *"There are no resurrections where there are no graves."*

Jesus accepted that suffering for doing what was right was part of the plan of God for redemption of the world. And in doing so, he teaches us how to accept suffering.

First, he teaches us to acknowledge that suffering for doing what is right is just part of the human experience. He doesn't explain why the righteous must suffer but submits to it as the Son of Man, a unique individual with human limits and divine destiny...because he knows that the suffering that he will endure will be redeemed.

Second, he teaches us that suffering, unfortunately, can be caused by the very people who are supposed to love us and accept us.

The Pharisees and the chief priests and the scribes — they wanted proof that his actions and his teachings were in accordance with God's will, because after all they were the professionals. But ultimately, they cannot love him and accept him because they have, by their own peacekeeping with the oppressor, rejected the one that sent Jesus — God, the Father.

They just know that they are right, so that means that Jesus must be wrong.

Jesus' righteous suffering becomes the proof that somewhere, someday along the line, they have gone astray.

He teaches us that for him to accomplish his mission, Jesus would have to go to the cross. And if we are to follow him...we are going to have to pick up our cross, too.

He teaches us the meaning of that phrase: "*Pick up your cross.*"

And it's most important that you hear this if you don't hear anything else that I say today:

This verse — "*picking up your cross*" — does not justify or excuse suffering or the oppressor in inflicting it. It does not mean that to be his disciples that we have to be doormats or be oppressed or silent.

What he means is that by choosing to accept that suffering to do what's right is just a part of life, it can therefore be overcome and be redeemed and be transformed for God's purpose for life and liberty for all in and through Jesus Christ.

He teaches us that the cross, the righteous suffering for all is not a call for shame.

The proof that the suffering inflicted upon Jesus doesn't beat him is the empty tomb itself.

We can accept that suffering is a part of life in the full knowledge...that just as it didn't beat Jesus, it won't beat us.

As we stand under the shadow of the cross and open the eyes of the blind in his name and preach that his kingdom has come at the expense of tyranny and cast out the devil that keeps our society paralyzed or fevered with anger.

He teaches us that we go astray whenever we try to play nice with the world...only to find our spiritual selves bankrupt. When we try to avoid the suffering that comes when we stand for what is right and true...

When we make deals with and be complicit with powers that have forgotten their purpose, all for the sake of keeping the peace...our very soul, our very lives will be lost.

When we act to protect and preserve self-interest instead of accepting the inconvenience of suffering for doing what is right, we go far astray.

We must repent and return to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

His sense of purpose and his call are too strong to be defeated...even by death.

Wherever you are in your life...whatever is happening with you right now...as our congregation and community move to make stands and postures for the sake of the Kingdom of God, for his reign and his peace to rule...let us remember that the world may fight back.

They may think that they have won. They may think that our principles are too old-fashioned. They may try to convince us that religion itself is dying.

But let us stand anyway for what is right and let us see how the God of Jesus Christ brings resurrection power to bear in the world.

Amen.