

Lenten Sermon Series: Preparing for the New Creation-“Why?”

Luke 19:29-40; Isaiah 50:4-9; Luke 22:39-63; 23

Salem United Methodist Church; April 14, 2019

Rev. Dr. Sue Shorb-Sterling

Today is the last Sunday in Lent, the forty days that precedes the Crucifixion and the Resurrection of Jesus. During this time we can intentionally and with discipline try a new spiritual practice or resurrect an old one. These spiritual practices help us grow in our faith. The purpose of these spiritual practices is to connect us in new ways to the Holy so we can be transformed into a new creation in Christ.

I began my Lenten journey with hope and excitement. I received a suggestion from a colleague to check out the spiritual programs at Bon Secours Retreat Center. So I began my Lent on Ash Wednesday spending a one day silent retreat at the Center. I came away with a sense of peace and expectation. So I decided to continue with another program focused on spiritual listening which met once a week for two hours. I was able to attend two of these sessions when my plan for Lent was interrupted with one phone call the third week of Lent. I was told that our ten year old granddaughter had gone into respiratory arrest and was being flown to UVA Medical Center. My chosen Lenten practice to learn more about and practice spiritual listening was abandoned as we drove to Charlottesville. My Lenten practice became one of crying out to God, shouting at God, begging and pleading with God, and questioning if God was even listening! I know many of us have suffered with our loved ones as we have watched them suffer physical, emotional, psychological, and/or spiritual pain. We have stood by their bedsides praying for miracles. Or, we have watched loved ones make choices that we know will destroy their lives and we can do nothing but pray for God to intervene. Or, we have discovered that our loved ones have been physically, mentally, and/or sexually abused at the hands of another, and we wish we could have protected them from this abuse. There are countless ways of suffering in which we suffer with those we love. And each of us has experienced suffering in some way, shape, or form.

Suffering is part of our journey in life. Suffering can be both personal and collective. Collective suffering occurs when one group of people who have power over another inflicts suffering onto a powerless group. Examples of this are: the suffering of African-American families when their loved ones were lynched; the suffering of Jewish, Italian, Greek, Irish, Latino, African and other ethnic immigrant families who have been ostracized, abused, and refused work throughout our nation's history and painfully still exists today; the suffering of children whose families because of war and/or famine have no home, clean water, health care, or nutrition; and the suffering of the first century Jews under the occupation of the Roman Empire. Suffering has always been part of the human condition.

As we experience suffering we cry out, “Why? Why me? Why is this happening?” Or we ask, “Why does suffering exist?” Humans have tried to explain suffering through the story of Adam and Eve by blaming their disobedience as the causation of suffering. The Psalmists do not hesitate to question God about suffering. Job's friends blamed his suffering on God punishing Job for his sins. When we suffer is God punishing us? Is God punishing the person who is being abused, tortured, bullied, raped, and/or chronically ill? Was God punishing Jesus by having him executed on the cross? I would answer, “No,” to all these questions. And I would add that it is ok to question God. Even Jesus questioned God the night before his crucifixion in the grove of olive trees as to why he was to suffer such a brutal execution. And according to the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus asks God while hanging on the cross in excruciating pain, “Why have you forgotten me?” After Jesus' crucifixion and even after the Resurrection, the followers of Jesus strive to find meaning in all of this by asking, “Why did it happen this way? What was the purpose of Jesus' execution?” Suffering makes no sense.

If you are sitting there hoping I have the answer to the question, “Why do we have suffering?” I will disappoint you. I do not have the answer. However, from my understanding of who God is, I will claim that God does not use suffering as a punishment and God doesn’t cause suffering. Suffering happens. And when suffering happens, where is God? Does God abandon us? Not according to the prophet Isaiah. In chapter 50, verses 4-9, God steps in to love the one who is suffering, to be with the one who is suffering, and to bring people to walk with the one who is suffering. God is the one who becomes our help, who gives us strength to stand and face our enemies, who gives us courage to look suffering in the face and say, “God’s got this with me.” God stands in solidarity with all who are suffer. The early Christians soon saw the one Isaiah mentions as Jesus who suffered at the hands of others, and God helped him.

The night before Jesus Crucifixion, we find Jesus in the olive tree orchard pleading and begging God to keep him from suffering this cruel, tortuous, and painful execution. We even hear Jesus chastising his disciples for not praying with him. This is a very human Jesus. His agony and his fear are real. He checks in to see if this plan God and he made before coming to earth was really a good idea now that he was in the thick of his mission. So he turns to his disciples hoping they will stand in solidarity with him, but they are too weak. According to Luke, an angel gives Jesus strength. Remember it is Luke that has angels appear in the birth story of Jesus. With the strength that the angel gives Jesus, he continues to anguish but moves to acceptance, “Not my will, but your will be done.”

When we suffer, we question. We bargain. We plead. We blame until an angel or the Holy Spirit shows up, often in the form of caring, compassionate people who give us strength and courage to face the unknown. The word, compassion, literally means from the Latin, co-suffering or to suffer with. God suffered with Jesus during his persecution and Crucifixion. Jesus suffers for us and co-suffers with us, stands in solidarity with us. Followers of Jesus have tried to find meaning in the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus since it happened. He became the Passover Lamb who was killed for the sins of the people, who reconciles us with God, who forgives us, who stands in the breach for us with God. Another meaning of the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus is this. We still sin, yet Jesus does not condemn us. Jesus saves us from our own humanity. Jesus becomes one of us. Jesus suffers with us. Jesus stands in solidarity with us. Jesus knows our pain and suffering first hand. And as Jesus stands with us, Jesus begins to order a new creation where love conquers hate and evil, where turmoil turns into peace, where justice exists, and joy comes in the morning. And with this new creation we, too, are made new. Through the healing of our suffering, we become more sensitive to what it means to suffer with others, to stand in solidarity with those who suffer, to work for healing, to be conduits of God’s peace, joy, love, forgiveness, and hope.

At this point we do not know the outcome of our granddaughter’s suffering and those who suffer with her. But we do know that there are thousands of people who are standing in solidarity with her and her family. Doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals are working round the clock monitoring every aspect of her body to promote healing. People who don’t even know her are praying for her and contributing financially to offset her family’s expenses. If anything good comes out of our family’s suffering, it is that so many have gathered around us and have chosen to suffer with us. A new creation is happening in our granddaughter’s life. What it will look like at this point remains known only God. We may not be able to answer why there is suffering, but we do know who is with us in our suffering.

Resources: *Lent: The Gift of New Creation* by Thomas Ehrich