

If for some reason you decide to Google “Buddhism and suffering,” the top hits will all direct you to a variety of websites about “The Four Noble Truths.” As you may recall, Buddhism begins with the premise that life is suffering—that is the first noble truth. The path to Enlightenment leads through those Four Noble Truths to the eightfold path. One might say that for a Buddhist, the journey of faith begins with suffering and is about moving toward Nirvana.

If you Google “Judaism and suffering,” the responses you get are a bit more diffused. That isn’t because Jews have been immune from suffering (they have not!) or that the Hebrew Bible doesn’t wrestle with the topic (it does!), but it’s not as clear about where to begin as it is for Buddhism. The top hit I got when I conducted my little experiment led me to a website called “All Experts.” There the question was posed: “How does Judaism explain suffering?” The questioner goes on to say that he has heard four explanations, as follows:

1. *We deserve suffering because of our sins.*
2. *We suffer because God is testing our faith.*
3. *Suffering is caused by the evil in the world and not by God.*
4. *We simply don't know, i.e. God works in mysterious ways.*

The rabbi who answers the questions on that website chose as his response, “none of the above.” (Honestly!) He then points the questioner to Rabbi Harold Kushner’s book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, adding that his reading is that we can never know *why* we suffer but what we can do is to learn how to respond in the face of suffering, how to cope when things go wrong.

Well, of course I also Googled “Christianity and suffering.” The top hit took me to a website called *Exploring Christianity* by a guy I never heard of, the Rev. Dick Tripp of New Zealand. He had six brief entries there that I thought were more or less balanced and on track and probably cover in the broadest sense a reasonably faithful survey of Christians across the theological spectrum from evangelical to orthodox to catholic. Tripp’s six points are as follows:

1. *The Bible is realistic in its approach to suffering; i.e. it doesn't dodge the question or pretend that all is well in the world or our lives.*
2. *He speaks about love and freewill. The classic answer to the theodicy question: “if God is all-powerful and all-good then why is there suffering?” is that the gift of freewill is irrevocable, and therefore God doesn't intervene in ways that violate that gift;*
3. *He reflects on the link between suffering and evil—even though creation is good, there is evil in the world;*
4. *He points out that God is not indifferent to suffering: we worship a compassionate God-with-us who suffers with us;*
5. *He speaks about the transformation of suffering: suffering can produce endurance, which produces character, which produces hope;*
6. *Finally, Tripp speaks of the ultimate removal of suffering—that is that the day will come when every tear will be wiped away and when swords will be beaten into plowshares and all the rest. God's ultimate intent for humankind, in the culmination of human history, is the removal of suffering.*

His framework, I think, is very similar to the Jewish response in that it doesn't try to offer an answer to the question of why the innocent suffer but a strategy for coping with suffering and trying to make some sense out of what is admittedly senseless.

Now my little interfaith study of this serious question is rather unscientific and superficial. But for me there are two reasons this is a helpful exercise. One is that suffering is universal and no religion that means to be relevant to the real world can ignore that. Buddhists and Jews and Christians and Hindus and Muslims may offer alternative points of view but none can deny the question. It's also interesting to me, from time to time, to see not only how the classical theologians have answered these questions in books that too often gather dust in libraries but to see what is out there on the web related to such serious questions. I confess to being a little bit surprised that my "hits" actually revealed some depth.

Now what prompted me to conduct this little study? Because today's Old Testament readings—both Job and the Psalm—wrestle with this very serious question, and specifically why the just suffer. In the case of Job as you probably know, a good and righteous man has lost everything. He played by the rules and had a good job and a lovely wife and a car that had the bumper sticker about how proud he was of his honor student children. Job had it all, and then the bottom fell out. And it wasn't fair.

To add insult to injury, his friends lose their patience with him and feel the need to defend God more than to support their friend. Job is *really* struggling and questioning his faith and that makes them very anxious. So they start to say things like "God must have a reason, Job." They start to say things like, "maybe you could pray harder." They tell him he should confess his sins because he must have done something to deserve this. Job is sick and tired of their lousy theology; although his own theology is somewhat questionable as well. Job assumes that God is the *cause* of his suffering and since he knows he's a decent guy what he is questioning is God's goodness, God's fairness. Job wants his day in court; all he asks is that God listen to his case and then when he hears Job's appeal to turn things around:

*Today also my complaint is bitter; God's hand is heavy despite my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find God, that I might come even to his dwelling! I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments.*

As Christians we know the opening words of Psalm 22 well because they were on the lips of Jesus as he died on the cross. The poet, like Job, describes what the mystics have called "the dark night of the soul." Certainly crucifixion must have been a dark night of the soul as well:

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.*

This person, like Job, is in profound pain. There is a paradox here, though, that John Calvin noticed: the poet cries out to the very one with whom he is struggling; the very one he feels has deserted him. The complaint being made *against* God is made *to* God. As close as the poet comes to despair, his cry is ultimately the cry of faith: *my God, my God*—please help me because I have no place else to turn.

Much of the time we come to Church perhaps as much out of habit as anything else. But we've been taught also that here is where we can find God, and Jesus has promised that whenever two or three are gathered in Christ's name, Christ is in our midst. We come here to be with other Christians and to

share the bread and drink the wine and be re-membered as Christ's Body. We are assured here of God's love for us and also that we are members of Christ's Body, and therefore members of one another. So we come here, I think, to remember that we are not alone and not only that God is with us but that we are here for each other as well, with God's help.

And all of that is true. But suffering is also real and as a pastor I am all too aware that very often when people feel most alone and most scared and most isolated from God they too often pull away from the Church as well. Sometimes when a person is going through their own "dark night of the soul" they look around in Church and it looks like a happy place filled with happy people. And that's a good thing, until maybe you are going through chemotherapy or still grieving the loss of your dearest love or trying to parent a suicidal teenager or caught up in the throes of an addiction that has literally taken away the best of you. And in those moments it may well feel like the Church isn't for you, like God isn't even there for you. You may feel like Job or the Psalmist.

We come to Church on this day, and we get to hear Job speaking his mind. We get to hear the psalmist crying out to God for help. And in some strange and holy way that is good news for us. It is especially good news for us if we are in that dark place ourselves not simply because misery loves company but because we are reminded that we are not alone and that doubt and confusion don't negate faith, but are simply a part of the journey. And it is good news for us even if we are in a happy and secure place because our faith calls us to share one another's burdens. We are called to be better friends to those in pain than Job's friends were. We don't need to fix anything and we don't need to defend God. We just need to be there for each other because what people most need when they are in pain is for someone to hold their hand and remind them they are loved.

We do most definitely gather here to celebrate God's presence but we are a people who know something of God's absence as well. We know on this day of Resurrection that Easter comes only by way of the Cross, and that life is precarious, and that there are times when it does feel like someone has shut out the lights. Job feels like he is in the dark as he describes with such tremendous power: he looks in front and behind, to his right and left but nowhere can he see God because it is simply too dark.

The key interpretive verse in Job comes from the seventeenth verse, the last one we read today. In the NRSV we heard: "if only I could vanish in darkness, and the thick darkness would cover my face." Job despairs, it seems, because he cannot find God. And because he cannot find God, it appears as if he is saying that he may as well just vanish and allow himself to be absorbed by that darkness. But the Hebrew is ambiguous and in this case, I wonder if the NIV has a better translation into English. There Job comes off as feisty and defiant and ever more intent to press his case with God. They translate it this way: "Yet I am not silenced by the darkness, by the thick darkness that covers my face." *Yet I am not silenced...* I am not going to be quiet!

I can't prove to you which is right. What I can tell you is that in both Job and Psalm 22, and in my experience as a pastor as well, the simple fact of speaking out loud about the pain we are experiencing—of "taking that to God in prayer"—is in some deep way already healing. To speak the truth about our lives, even the hardest parts, by addressing God or sharing it with a close friend is already to be moving toward the light. That doesn't answer the question of suffering. It does mean that the God we address does care, and *is* with us, even when it is too dark for us to see.