

**“A Resurrection Shaped Life: The Meaning of Suffering”**

**A Sermon for University Congregational Church**

**Sunday, April 26, 2020**

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Traditional Word

**9** At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. **10** Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. **11** And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

**12** At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, **13** and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted[g] by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him. Mark 1:9-13

Contemporary word:

"And then I remembered this basic religious principle that God isn't there to take away our suffering or our pain but to fill it with his or her presence." Anne Lamont, *Traveling Mercies*

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Opening

Last Sunday, Robin reminded us that the “upper room” story is about Jesus inspiring his disciples—that is—he literally breathed new life into them. The Hebrew Bible has numerous accounts of this “breath of God”. In Genesis, God breathes life into clay, Job speaks of the breath of God in his nostrils, the prophet Isaiah speaks of a God who gives breath to the people, and then John tells us of Jesus breathing inspiration into his followers. Our first act upon being delivered out of our mothers’ wombs and into this world is one great breath that then causes our first barbaric yawp to be sounded over the rooftops—our first cry as humans. Our lives are a continuous stream of breathing out and breathing in, our respiration and inspiration and expiration. The resurrection-shaped life is one that understands that we hold within our lungs the very breath of God. Life. How ironic, then, that COVID-19 is a respiratory disease—one that we catch by breathing in—and one that we spread by breathing out.

In Jake Owensby's book, *The Resurrection Shaped Life, Dying and Rising on Planet Earth*, (the book we're using for our current sermon series), the author takes this understanding of the breath of God into the next chapter by contemplating the meaning of suffering. For centuries, philosophers and theologians have struggled with this question: Why would an all-loving and all-powerful God allow suffering. Why would faithful Jews be annihilated in the Holocaust? Why would good Muslims be slaughtered during the Spanish Inquisition? And why would devout Christians endure deprivations and terrible persecution under the current Chinese government? This is the basis of the doctrine of "theodicy"—how could a loving, all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing God allow human misery? And can we find an understanding that would justify our belief in God despite the fact that terrible human suffering exists? And finally, given the unavoidable fact that human suffering is evident in our world, what then must God be like?

One school of thought places the answer entirely on humans—we're to blame—there's no reason to do any work with our theology, because God is perfect, therefore humans are guilty of all causes of suffering because of our disobedience to God. And this understanding seems to work well for some people—but it doesn't work for me.

Another school of thought has people revising their understanding of God. This school of thought says that God's hands are tied. To give humans freedom to make choices, God could not therefore take away our freedom to choose to do evil. And in this theology, God isn't all-powerful. In fact, since we're free, God can't see with certainty what our next course of action might be, in fact, the chaotic nature of humans would make this impossible. For this school of thought, God can't be all-knowing either. We could spend hours, days, entire careers on the discussion of these two views of theodicy—of why God allows suffering—but we're Congregationalists—and we're pretty pragmatic—so what if we instead changed the question—what if we asked instead: How will God make the world's suffering mean something? Or even, how can I work with God to make the world's suffering mean something?

Jesus knew a thing or two about suffering. He was born a Jewish man in Roman-occupied Palestine and lived with the conflict that those disparate worlds created when combined. He cried out from his place of execution—"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" But we find solidarity in Jesus' words because they are such human words. Humans cry out to God to try and understand—to make meaning—out of our suffering—and the suffering of others.

When Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, he arose out of the water and a dove descended and, in some gospel accounts, we hear God say how pleased he is with Jesus. When we are baptized, we are baptized into new life and this new life then has a new dream of what we might suffer for. In our selfish, me-first world, we might

suffer long hours at work to make money so we can buy the things we think we need, or that we've been conditioned to think we need. When we live a selfish life we endure lots of suffering for the sake of Empire—for the status quo. But when we are born into new life through baptism, through a desire to follow Jesus and live like him—resistant to empire—then we are born into not only a new life that rejects self-centeredness, but we are also born into a new dream—a dream of what the world might be like if we all followed Jesus. Instead of our old dream of self-reliance and solitary suffering, we are then born anew into a life that cares more about community and sharing than self-centered pursuits. We begin to dream about healing the world. So, ask yourself, what are you suffering for? Or better yet, what are you willing to suffer for?

When we are social distancing we are showing ourselves in solidarity with each other and with each other's suffering. Willful ignorance of the science behind the policy decisions will only lead to increased suffering. There are calls to ignore the science and reopen our economy. But the science shows us that this will only lead to more and worse suffering. We heal the world by listening to experts, not politicians. We value people over profits. I know that the coming economic troubles WILL hurt people as well, but we will actually end more lives by re-opening our society too early and that will have an even worse effect on our economy. A damaged economy is bad, very bad, but it's not death—our country has a proven track record of being resilient. Our 401Ks hemorrhaging value is bad—but it's not death. We are suffering and enduring because we care about other people. We care about life. We're not selfish—we're not only concerned with our survival, we care about the entire human family. Please take heart when you hear conflicting advice regarding our social distancing policies—trading lives for the sake of the economy is a death-dealing proposition—there is nothing life-giving about.

In fact, a life devoted to making others suffer for the sake of control has nothing to do with God. On the contrary, God comes to us to redeem all suffering. So we endure. And we participate in the dreaming of new life. When Jesus was tempted in the desert—he was shown what his life would be if he chose to be self-centered, me-first, the world can pull itself up by its own bootstraps. The adversary, Satan, showed him a dream of all of that Jesus could be—everything that Jesus could have if he but admitted that the status quo was correct and our lives are only about taking care of ourselves. But instead he said no, he chose a different dream. He rejects that dream—even with all of its glittering and comfortable allure. Instead he adopts a different dream—the Holy One's dream for all of humanity. Jesus then turns his life to the healing of the world. Jesus turns his attention away from his own life and towards the life of others. He feeds the hungry, he heals the sick and broken-hearted, he restores lunatics to sanity. He breaks bread with streetwalkers and extortionists and drug addicts and the homeless and even con artists. By the most costly example possible he teaches us to forgive the unrepentant, to resist the violent with

compassionate truth and to give the thief who steals our shoes the very shirt off of our back.

The religious leaders of his time branded Jesus a heretic and a resister. A troublemaker. The political leaders of his time saw him as a threat to the status quo and set forth to have him killed. Jesus then suffered on the cross, crying out to God during his own suffering, and gave his life for the higher purpose of mending the world. His final breath was a human cry of suffering that we all relate to—because our own final breath—our final respiration—our expiration will be similar. So we join in Jesus’s dream—and therefore God’s dream—of healing the world. Thereby making us all whole.

And then, by raising Jesus from the dead, whether literally, metaphorically, or spiritually, that act “inscribes Jesus’ suffering—gives it meaning—and thereby gives all suffering meaning—suffering that occurs for the sake of healing the world—with infinite and eternal meaning. Gods is making things right—through us—with this kind of suffering—suffering that we endure for the sake of others.

We are going to suffer—that’s our lot in life—we are frail, weak, fragile mortal creatures. And yet, because of our capacity for empathy, we can do more than just endure what we see as senseless misery. Jesus has called us to follow him and his dream of a healed world as the higher purpose that might guide our lives. We might suffer for the sake of the world—to heal others—to mend a broken world. To take up the cross and follow him. To follow him through suffering towards life eternal. This is what it means to be a Christian.

#### BENEDICTION

So, this week, when a family member or friend starts a conversation about the need to hurry up and reopen our economy, remind them and yourself, that we are enduring this time because we care about others more than ourselves. We care about healing the world more than our own selfish desires. The resurrection-shaped life knows this and helps bring forth new life after suffering. You are honoring the memory of Jesus of Nazareth when you do this. Let’s dream this together with God. And then, let’s make it so. Amen.

Jake Owensby, *The Resurrection Shaped Life: Dying and Rising on Planet Earth*,