

***What the Trinity Says About Suffering***  
Hebrews 2:10-18; 4:14-16; Revelation 5:6-14

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“Where is God?” the boy asked. “In heaven,” they all said. So he looked up to the sky with its deep blue. He could not see through it or beyond it. The clouds floated between heaven and the boy, hinting of other things. At night the boy stared into the dark sky, looking for God. The stars were the pinholes through which heaven was leaking, but God seemed far away.

“Where is God?” the boy asked when he was older. “The Lord is in his holy temple,” he heard. He learned about the temple in Jerusalem which was a box within a box within a wall within a wall. He wondered how God could stay in one place and whether God could be captured like that. He went to church because his mother told him it was the temple now. “God inhabits the praises of his people,” the church people said, and they called it “God’s house.” So the boy would go to visit God the same way he would go to visit his grandma, but God never offered him cookies or sat to talk with him.

“Where is God?” the boy asked when he was a teenager. “He is in this book,” they said. “You can meet him in this book. This is how you find him. Study, study, study.” So he took the book and slept with it under his pillow. He brought it to church when the youth minister explained things to him. But as he lived among the people of the book, he decided that God was an idea, a concept to be believed. He believed the concept, but sometimes at night he would read the book lying on his bed, and when he read the songs in the middle of the book or the stories about Jesus he had the feeling that there was a dimension to this world he was missing.

When the boy became a man, his mother became ill. As he sat by her bed, he thought about losing her. “Where is God?” he asked, and no one answered. His mother could no longer speak. The sky was dark. The church was closed. The book was on her table, unopened. “Oh, God!” he cried as he held his mother’s hand. He felt a pain in his chest like something tearing. Just then “love shook his body like a devastation.” Just then he knew he was not alone. “I cried to God,” he thought, “and he heard my cry.” He took the book off the table and opened it to the middle. There he saw these words: “The Lord is near the brokenhearted.” “I have heard of you,” he said. “I have seen evidence of you and I have believed in the idea of you, but now I have found you in my crushed and broken heart.”

I have observed—as you probably have—that most people who come to know God find God in the midst of suffering. Yes, there are people who turn away from God because of suffering. But I think there are more people who experience God’s reality when they are brokenhearted.

Why would that be? Why would it be true that the Lord is near the brokenhearted? Is God just so full of compassion that he draws near to us when we are hurting? Yes. But I think there is something more. I believe that there is suffering at the very heart of God because Jesus, the one who suffered with us and for us, has been taken up into God himself. The God who looks down on us is none other than the Jesus who suffered abandonment, betrayal, rejection, torture, distrust, hunger, thirst, weakness—who suffered in every way that we suffer. Our hurt is not something outside of God that God has a hard time understanding. Our hurt has been taken into the very heart of God.

That is what I want us to think about on this Trinity Sunday which comes soon after the news of several deaths on the island, in particular the death of a young woman of twenty-one. Often we turn the doctrine of the Trinity into a strange exercise of arithmetic and logic, explaining, as I did to the children, how three forms of God can all be God. But I am struck this week by what the Trinity says to us about the human suffering that now has a place in the very being of God.

For over twenty years, I have preached on the Trinity on the Sunday after Pentecost. I will not pretend to understand the depths of the mystery of God. St. Augustine said on this subject, “If you can understand it, it isn’t God.” I heard about a father waiting up for his son who came home awfully late on Saturday night. He said to his son, “I want an explanation and I want the truth.” “Make up your mind,” said the son. “You can’t have both.” If I give you an explanation it won’t be the whole truth about God. I like what Frederick Buechner said: “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit mean that the mystery beyond us, the mystery among us, and the mystery within us are all the same.”

If you stick around Harbor Church you will hear other sermons on the Trinity in years to come, and we will look at it from various angles. But today I have this idea, which I haven’t found in the literature, but seems true to the experience of the early church: *The doctrine of the Trinity is a way of making sense of the Ascension.*

The gospel of Luke ends and the book of Acts starts with the resurrected Jesus ascending into heaven. The sermon Peter gives on Pentecost announces that God has made Jesus the crucified both Lord and Messiah. When Stephen finishes his sermon he sees the Lord Jesus standing at the right hand of God in heaven. The letter to Ephesians begins with a meditation on our unity with Christ in the heavenly places, saying that the power at work in us is the same power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him at God’s right hand...far above all rule and authority and power and dominion. That idea that Jesus has been raised not just to a state of being alive again but raised to share God’s life in heaven and to share God’s authority runs all through the letters in the New Testament. It was a core conviction of the early church.

Can you imagine what it was like to know Jesus as a flesh and blood person, subject to fatigue and hunger, someone who was tortured and killed in a public way, and then to stand up and tell people that this same Jesus is now ruling over the world from the throne of God? The church understood the Ascension before it understood the Incarnation. That is, the first thing they knew was that Jesus was raised from the dead and then taken up into heaven. That was the first thing they proclaimed. It was later that they began to say that God became flesh in Jesus, that Jesus wasn’t just adopted by God, he was *sent* by God. He started out in some sense with God, before he was ever human, but then he became human, really human, flesh and blood, and then went back to God.

So what does it mean for the fully human Jesus to be part of God? That is where thinking about the Trinity begins. What to do with the Holy Spirit comes up later. The first question is what to say about Jesus. We worship him. That worship is the center of our life together as the church. We know that he is Lord, that he shares the titles of God Almighty, the Holy One of Israel. We also know that there is only one God. But we are sure that the human Jesus is now one with God. What does that say about God’s nature?

One way to avoid this question is to say that the human part of Jesus did not go up into God, that he somehow left the human part behind. Some even say that God did not suffer on the cross; it was just the human part of him that suffered because God—according to Greek philosophy—cannot suffer. I think it is at the heart of the gospel that God *did* suffer on the cross, and that the Jesus who reigns now is the Jesus who suffered.

Is God a God who cannot change, who cannot learn? That is what the church has taught. But to be perfect do you have to be unchanging? How can you love if you are not changed by the one you love? How could God go through the experience of the cross and not be changed? In the person of Jesus, God experienced suffering and abandonment and death. As God the Father, God suffered the loss of a child. You can debate whether the change in God’s life came at the Incarnation or at the cross or at the ascension, but it seems to me that God experienced suffering in a way God had not before.

And when we see Jesus—the risen Jesus who showed his wounds to his disciples—taken up into heaven and taken into the godhead, we know that our human suffering has been taken up into God. There are many other things we can say about the Trinity based on orthodox theology, and we will say them in other sermons, but in the face of unexplainable human tragedy this is what we need to say today: the doctrine of the Trinity means that the Jesus who suffered is absolutely one with God the Father and the Spirit we experience in the church.

Do we doubt that Jesus suffered? Donna Corey was talking this week about her experience in the dungeon where Jesus was held before trial and whipped. Most of us have seen that portrayed on film. Mel Gibson made his film as a Catholic, but he did us a favor by helping us see the cross through Mary's eyes. We need to recover that sense of outrage and helplessness—what it is like to lose a child in a senseless way. It is that experience of senseless death that has now been taken up into God. The German scholar Hans-Joachim Iwand wrote, “We have made the bitterness of the cross, the revelation of God in the cross of Jesus Christ, tolerable to ourselves by learning to understand it as a necessity for the process of salvation...As a result the cross loses its arbitrary and incomprehensible nature” [quoted by Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p. 41]. When something arbitrary and incomprehensible happens to us, we need to remember that something like that happened to Jesus, and Jesus has carried that experience into the center of the life of God. That is what it means to say that he ever lives to intercede for us with the Father.

We may still get angry when terrible things happen to us, but we can't get angry because God is oblivious to suffering. God is not. Dorothy Sayers, the mystery writer and friend of Tolkien and Lewis, defended God this way:

“For whatever reason God chose to make man as he is — limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death — He had the honesty and the courage to take His own medicine. Whatever game he is playing with His creation, He has kept his own rules and played fair. He can exact nothing from man that He has not exacted from Himself. He has Himself gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair and death. When He was a man, He played the man. He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it well worthwhile” (Dorothy Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?* New York, Harcourt Brace, 1949, p. 4).

I think the doctrine of the Trinity tells us that what God went through in Jesus is now part of God's nature, and that God relates to us on that basis.

The book of Hebrews makes this point in chapter 2 using the image of Jesus as a high priest. The author says that when Jesus ascended to heaven, he went up into the real holy of holies—the one of which the holy of holies in the Temple was just a model. Jesus went into God's presence as a priest—representing us to God. To serve as that priest, he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect. He had to share our flesh and blood, and share our mortality. Because he was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help us when we are tested.

It is another way of saying metaphorically what I have been saying: that when Jesus went up to heaven the experience of human suffering was taken up into God in a new way. The preacher in Hebrews comes back to this theme in chapter 4 in one of the most comforting passages in the New Testament: “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (15-16).

Revelation 5 makes the same point in a visual way. John is looking around heaven at the creatures gathered around the throne of God. He sees in God's hand a scroll which is God's plan for carrying out his promises in history. But there is no one who can open the scroll so that the events can

unfold, so that the kingdom can come on earth. John weeps. He is told not to weep because the Lion of Judah, the Messiah, can open the scroll.

But when John looks the one approaching the throne is not a lion at all. It is a lamb that has been slaughtered, a lamb bleeding, suffering, appearing to be dead but alive. That suffering one is the only one who is able to open the scroll, to make salvation begin to unfold. The angels and thousands in heaven begin to sing the same praises to the lamb that they had earlier sung to God. And then John hears every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and under the sea, and they are all singing together, “All blessing and honor and glory and power to God on his throne and to the Lamb”—the Almighty and the slaughtered Jesus being worshiped as one.

Who is God? Is he the one who is far from us who ignores the reality of our suffering? If he the Maker who left his screwed-up creation to run on its own? No, the gospel says, God is the one who was slaughtered as we are. God is the one who has been tested in every way we are. Therefore let us go to him to receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.