

“Where Is God?” Good Friday, GPPC 4-14-17
Isaiah 52:13-53:12, John 18:1-19:42

As we’ve read the prophet Isaiah and John’s gospel, we do not need to say much more. Isaiah and John have already told us more than we can grasp. So we will speak just a few words more.

Reading the sad litany of what happens to an unnamed suffering servant in Isaiah and the suffering servant Jesus in John’s gospel, what may strike us is not how unusual this suffering is but how typical. Pick up any newspaper or click on any news website any day of the week, and you’ll find a repetition of themes already laid out here.

Those who are good or who seek to be good, are mistreated and lied about. A person trying to serve others, instead is betrayed and brought down. People with religious and secular power misuse their authority. Someone who is a devoted servant of others is murdered in the prime of life. A mob listens not to the truth but to falsehoods that support their anger. The nonviolent are pushed around and killed by the violent who then go home for a nice supper with family. The suffering we read about in scripture today is not unusual.

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What's unusual is our Christian understanding about *who* suffers, not just a human being but God. God also suffers. The One who spoke a word and created all that is, flung the galaxies into space, keeps the planets in their orbits, and gives every creature its breath, *this* One whom we might imagine to be safe and secure and aloof, *this* One also suffers.

This theology is at the center of our understanding of the Triune God, because as one theologian puts it, "The one who cannot suffer cannot love either." (Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 222.) The God we see revealed in Jesus Christ not only loves but *is* love. Love is the essence of God, not just an add-on characteristic.

So when we see suffering, we know God, the One who is Immanuel, God with us, is in the midst of it. Despite what they may feel, people do not suffer alone. God suffers with them. And because our God, the God of love, refuses to stand apart from us and from our suffering, the church always stands with persons who are suffering wherever they may be.

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Many of you are familiar with *Night*, Elie Wiesel's searing account of his time in the concentration camps at Auschwitz and Buchenwald. At one point in the book, three prisoners, (one of them a child), three prisoners are sentenced to be hanged in front of the thousands of other prisoners watching. Wiesel says, "The three victims mounted [the gallows] together onto the chairs.

"The three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses.

"'Long live liberty!' cried the two adults.

"But the child was silent.

"'Where is God? Where is He?' someone behind me asked.

"At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs tipped over.

"Total silence throughout the camp. On the horizon, the sun was setting.

"'Bare your heads!' yelled the head of the camp. His voice was raucous. We were weeping.

"'Cover your heads!'

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“Then the march past began. The two adults were no longer alive. Their tongues hung swollen, blue-tinged. But the third rope was still moving; being so light, the child was still alive....

“For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes were not yet glazed.

“Behind me, I heard the same man asking:

“Where is God now?”

“And I heard a voice within me answer him:

“Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows....” (Elie Wiesel, *Night*, 61-62.)

Where is our God? On the gallows. On the cross. Wherever the children of God suffer, that’s where God is. There is nowhere we can go, no pain we can endure, in which God is not also present with us.

Yes, Easter is coming, thank God. But on this Good Friday we also give thanks for the holy mystery and the wondrous love of God who is

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with us, strengthening and comforting us, in our betrayals, injustice, pain, and grief. Where is God?

There.

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