

Is This Suffering?

It's good to be with you today, friends. It's been almost 5 months since I last worshipped with you. Five full, challenging months.

Since October, I have been inside a church for worship a total of three times, which is three times more than most. Once was at the ordination and consecration of our new bishop, Diana. Once was to step in for Padre Beto at the Spanish language service at St. Michaels. And once was Ash Wednesday. The rest of the time I've been at home, on Zoom, praying the daily office and knitting more than ever before.

During this pandemic, at a moment of ecological upheaval, social unrest, and deep woundedness across the world and in this country, I find myself wondering whether my lack of access to church could be fairly described as "suffering."

Is the feeling of disconnection that has been more of a constant than almost any other emotion this past year the same thing as suffering?

There are two common uses of the word, suffering. One: suffering is the experience of great pain, as in...

In the last moments of their life, the covid-infected patient struggled to breathe and in their struggle, experienced suffering.

The other use is a little less severe. I *endure* this inconvenience. I suffer this or that.

I'm not sure we're always aware of which version we're using: suffering as the experience of pain, or suffering as the endurance of an inconvenience.

For the last several years, messages have come from the highest offices in the land which have sought to convince people that the enduring of inconveniences is the experience of great pain.

Go to an anti-mask rally and you'll see what I mean.

But regardless of our political affiliation or social location, many of us gathered here might have considered our inconveniences as pains, and many of us have experienced pains that would be inadequately described as inconveniences.

Suffering is real. But, anymore, even what is *real* is in question.

Jesus began to explain to his followers that the Son of Man must suffer, be persecuted by the chief priests and leaders, must die in the most gruesome manner, would be buried, and on the third day, rise again.

Before Easter Sunday comes, Good Friday must be suffered.

One of the benefits of the Gospel of Mark is its straightforwardness. Mark tells it like it is, and Jesus, in this passage, is laying it out pretty clearly. He is explaining the inevitability of suffering in the Paschal Mystery, and my guess is that the suffering he refers to is not the *inconvenience* of the cross. At least, not in the way that we find it inconvenient that we can't come to church, or must wear a mask, or are restricted in all manner of ways.

The cross is an inconvenient reality that every Christian must contend with, but Mark describes the coming Passion not as an *inconvenience Jesus must suffer*, but as a suffering that will lead to his death. Jesus knows full well the physical and psychological suffering that is coming his way.

And when he explains what is coming to his followers, Peter, who I often read as both a stand-in for the Church and a stand-in for the reader (i.e. **me**, as I was preparing for this sermon), Peter doth protest. Peter does not want to hear this message of the inevitability of Jesus' suffering.

And I am curious as to why. I wonder if Peter is worn down by the suffering that he has experienced. I wonder what he has witnessed under Roman occupation. How many crucifixions has he been present for? How much death has he endured?

Many biblical commentators talk about the apostles' expectation of a Messiah who would be a military leader and how Jesus upset that vision, perhaps leading to the kind of protest that we see in Peter.

But I wonder—what if he just didn't have the capacity for any more suffering? That is an idea I think we can all relate to.

It has been one hell of a year. We're coming up on the first anniversary of the pandemic lockdowns. We have all experienced inconveniences. Many among us have experienced pain, financial hardship, and even death.

This Lent feels almost like an extension of the Lent of 2020, as though it never really ended.

Yet there is something different this year. There are changes. There is a glimmer of hope.

Some of you may have been vaccinated already. I have not. My grandma has. My parents have. I know many teachers here in Portland who have been vaccinated against covid. I know the supply is short because I have been trying to get an appointment. I will soon be a caregiver for a family member, providing assistance as they go through radiation to treat a recently diagnosed cancer.

There is a mixture of hope and pain, inconvenience and undeniable hardship, and that mixture is the basis of my day-to-day life—and the day-to-day life of all of us.

Suffering is real, but suffering is not clear cut. It is not black or white.

And we are not always talking about the same thing, using the same language.

But the season of Lent, where we find ourselves reflecting on the absence of the Alleluiah, where we find ourselves reflecting on the meaning of suffering—ours, each other's, and that of Jesus—we are actively making decisions about whether we even engage that suffering, whether we deny that suffering, whether we name what we are experiencing as inconvenience or as pain

This long, interminable Lent is inviting us into a reflection on a suffering that God, in Godself, has already done.

So I leave you to consider that following Jesus to the cross is stepping into an experience of suffering that God has already endured.

And because of this, God is capable of guiding us through it.

The question is: Will we resist God, or will we trust God?