

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

By Burt L. Burleson

“Deepened or Cheapened?”

Matthew 2: 13-23

January 2, 2005

It's impossible to pay attention to life and to the world and not have the meaning of things yanked out from under you from time to time. Suffering sends us reeling, if we're awake to it at all. It knocks us off center and we feel threatened by an overwhelming lack of sense and meaning.

... least I am. Anyone not feel nudged some towards despair by what took place in our world this week? “Human suffering threatens all networks of meaning.” (Beardeslee in Taylor's God in Pain, 121)

The earth screamed prophetically at us, **“You're very small... You are frail creatures of dust... that's what you are.”** And all of the suffering we're seeing jumps up before our eyes to question how we can be people of faith in light of such horrible tragedy.

Thousands upon thousands... And to see the sadness of it demands that a soul start trying to make that round peg of God's goodness fit down into that square hole of human suffering.

It won't fit...

And the Bible really never tries to make it fit. It just says, **“This is what is”** and it's very honest about it. You don't turn too many pages of scripture without dealing with the human condition and the pain of it.

In the beginning, right off the bat, you have Adam alive but lonely... he's alone.

Then you have Adam and Eve's suffering and sure you can say that they brought in on themselves and take some comfort in that but still you have a Creator who made the pain possible.

Seems like there's always this contradiction in the biblical stories... this rub of someone hurting and often due to no fault of their own.

Sarah and Abraham get Isaac, “oh boy.”

But Hagar and Ishmael get banished in the process.

Jacob loves Rachel and breaks Leah's heart over and over.

Jacob's descendants flourish in Egypt and Pharaoh kills their babies because of it.

It's always side-by-side in the Bible. The goodness of life... and the unspeakable, unexplainable pain of it.

There's the good stuff, **“Blessed is the one whose delight is in God's ways. She's like a tree planted by a stream which yields wonderful fruit and whatever she does will prosper.”**

Do you know that Psalm? It's the first one... Psalm 1. Do you know what comes right before it? The story of Job. Job and all his unfair, unjust suffering is right up next to this promise about good things happening to good people.

In Revelation there's a lamb standing at the end of it all... but he's all scarred up from suffering.

The Bible never let's us get too far from this dilemma.

Like in our Gospel reading for today and our experience this week. Here we are with *O Little Town of Bethlehem* still ringing in our ears from Christmas and those sweet sounds are colliding, colliding head on with the dissonant weeping that we hear. Mary is rocking her baby and Rachel is burying hers, she can't be comforted... And it's right there on the first page of papyrus in the gospel story.

This ever-present paradox...

this paschal mystery.

The Bible just lays it out there without explanation,

Even at Christmas.

The God of the universe is present to us... born in a manger and named Emmanuel, because God is with us in the flesh. The Angels sing of peace on earth. Magi deliver their gifts to a new king... the nations worship this king. And then Herod, who is a psychopath, goes on a rampage and kills all the young boys in Bethlehem... and something in us screams, **"This ought not be."**

John Claypool, a well-known Baptist preacher back in the '60s and '70s had a daughter, Laura Lu, who had leukemia and died of it. She suffered horribly. Carlyle Marney, his fellow preacher and friend, wrote to say, **"God has a lot to give account for."**

Did you let that thought come this week when you saw the bodies of the children lined up? **"This ought not be... God you owe us an explanation."** If you entertained that thought, it's going to impact your faith. Entering into this reality can cheapen or deepen your faith.

It can cheapen it if you insist on that Divine explanation as to why... there isn't one. But if you must find one and create one, it will for certain come up short and shallow.

You and your theology will sleep well. You'll have some tidy answer and the world will be back in your control but your faith will be cheap.

The silliest and the cruelest things are held and said in the face of human pain.

Sometimes it's just sheer self-centered narcissism. **"God, spared me and my house..."** "But the tornado hit your neighbors, what do you say to that?"

Remember Job's friends and all their explanations as to why he was suffering? It's what we do, we're meaning addicts and we want some cause and effect. It's our idol. **"I can make sense of this, Job... there's a skeleton in your closet."**

Your faith is cheapened if you have to have to get things spelled out.

If you're courageous you put your need for explanation on hold. You sit longer with the pain... but you're still vulnerable, staying with it, without answers. Something in you starts to go numb... there's the danger of that, of shutting down.

Katie Sciba emailed me Friday.

We of course are completely taken over by the tragedy so close to us. Our emails are flying with our co-workers as we all scramble to get things together so that we can be part of the relief effort. I am nervous about our move, but in light of the tragedy, anxious to get where our team is so that we can work better together to get things going on to Aceh.

One of the things we are working on is a mobile medical unit with supplies from the medical boat Matt and I will be working with. Hopefully, we can get it up to Aceh next week. I am sure you are watching the news but just in case you don't know, Aceh is the northernmost province on Sumatra where the epicenter of the earthquake was. So, they had a tsunami and an earthquake. The devastation there is unbelievable. The death toll there and on islands along the coast of Aceh has reached 60,000. I was watching CNN a few days ago, and they kept talking about Sri Lanka and how bad it was there. It is bad there, but by far the worst is here in Indonesia.

Matt and I are overwhelmed by the tragedy. We have had to explain it to Anna b/c everyone is flying their flags half-mast and we have one in our yard. She asked if she could decorate something in her room to show she cares about the hurt people from the earthquake. She told me she had a dream that she was in the earthquake and she saved Maile and was swimming with Maile. I asked her if she was scared in the dream, and she said, "No, I could handle it, Mom." She is so funny!

I don't know how people are dealing with the tragedy there in the States, but I am sure you all get enough of CNN to make you numb. I am asking you to plead with people to help and to not be numb. We read yesterday that Thailand is being overwhelmed by volunteers and the death toll there is 2000. The relief effort here is so sparse and barely begun, and Indonesia has lost 60,000 people. There must be people who can come.... There must be people who can give...

Don't go numb. It's a problem for us because we are, in our world, so insulated from much of the world's pain day to day. In our high-tech western world, we solve problems. We have a modern manifesto that says we can either avoid suffering, relieve it, or fix the cause of it. **"We have the money and the know-how, now let's get with it."**

We can help and we will but if we do so to anesthetize ourselves... write a check and detach... our faith will be cheapened. If you let the soul go numb, it goes numb to everything.

The pain around you...

Your own need and your own sin...

The Spirit of God.

God's graceful presence in your life.

If you've seen this pain your spiritual life is in jeopardy just now. If you put your heart on a shelf... whenever you put your heart on a shelf, the game's over.

So what is there to do? What is the way? We believe the gospel! ... and the gospel is that God joins us. God empties himself... and enters into the human predicament. Surrenders one position and risks Himself in another... That's the way.

Matthew makes it clear on the first page that God with Us, Emmanuel, is not about God ridding us of suffering but God getting under it with us. God is here... but Rachel is weeping.

And then Matthew makes it clear on the last page that this love that suffers is also love that transforms. The cross is not some rescue mission because we're bad... It's God's M.O. God's way. Suffering love that enters it all, takes it all on, and in the process, redeems it. It's not an explanation... it's a path... a pattern.

It is the Paschal Mystery. Life in a cruciform pattern... a coincidence of opposites. Life and death so close together... The cross of Jesus takes us to a kind of paradoxical knowing, where death is a part of life and failure is a part of victory (Richard Rohr). Where wounds are beautiful. Augustine said, **“In my deepest wound I see your glory and it dazzles me.”**

If we give ourselves to the deep way of Christ, we give ourselves to the world and to its pain... but in the process we give ourselves to God who continually “brings life out of death and calls into being what does not exist.” (R. Rohr)

Saying, “I’ll follow Jesus” means believing that enough to let yourself hurt. As Paul says in Philippians, **“I want to become like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection.”** Can’t have one without the other.

Back in the 1930s there was a Jewish young woman by the name of Simone Weil who left her teaching job for a year in order to work as an unskilled laborer... She changed her name... rented a room near the factory where she worked and lived life like her fellow workers.

She wasn’t strong and she got sick working the long hours in the bad conditions for low pay. When Hitler occupied France in 1940, she worked in the resistance and eventually immigrated to England. She was safe and warm and educated... and she’s in England but she decided there to voluntarily limit herself to the same rations the occupied French could get with their food cards.

In the spring of 1943, sick and malnourished, she entered the hospital where she died at the age of 34.

Why did she do that? Because she believed in Christ. She was never baptized, though, because she thought it would make her an insider instead of an outsider like him. “She believed it was possible for a person to take on suffering for the sake of others...” (Barbara Brown Taylor)

She learned some things... it deepened her in profound, saintly ways... and wrote a great deal and is read widely now as a Christian mystic. Her primary truth was the Christian faith has nothing to do with the removal of suffering. It offers no “supernatural remedy for suffering,” she wrote. What it offers, instead, is a “supernatural use for it.”

Listen to Simone’s vision of it...

When the soul is able to go on loving God, not because life is good but simply because God is, if it does not renounce loving, it happens one day to hear, not a reply to the question which it cries, for there is none, but the very silence as something infinitely more full of significance than any response, like God himself speaking. It knows then that God’s absence here below is the same thing as the secret presence upon earth of the God who is in heaven.” (Weil’s story from Taylor’s *God in Pain*)

The suffering in the world just now is great. Don’t explain it away, don’t run away... it’ll only lead to a different, a quiet and unredemptive, suffering. Follow your Christ... to the heart of it and trust God to find you there and give you life... Trust God to give the world life because of who you are and what suffering love can do with that. Amen. (copyright, Burt L. Burlinson, 2005)