

## **SERMON: LENT, 1 Suffering**

*God comforts us in our sorrows so that we can comfort each other with the consolation we ourselves have received from God.” II Corinthians 1:3-4*

Have you ever said this when someone is going through a tough time? “God never gives us more than we can handle.” We say that a lot. It is comforting. I don’t know if it is true.

God never gives us more than we can handle? More like God specializes in giving us more than we can handle. Especially when we suffer? Who can handle suffering?

Finding hope in suffering is our Lenten theme this year at Faith Lutheran Church. As a congregation, we are reading the classic book by Victor Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning. Grab your copy in the narthex today.

We’ll gather on Wednesday evenings during Lent for dinner and a study of the book. And I’ll present a Lenten sermon series about suffering.

Why does God give us more than we can handle?

There is this amazing passage in II Corinthians written by Paul, II Corinthians 1:1-3. Paul experienced a lifetime of suffering. But still Paul writes these words: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God of all mercies and the God of all consolation. God comforts us in our suffering so that we can comfort others when they suffer. Comfort them with the consolation we ourselves have received from God.”

This idea of comforting each other with the comfort we have received from God is so important that these words of Paul are the very first words spoken at every Lutheran funeral service.

We suffer. God comforts us. We comfort each other.

Paul is an interesting study in suffering. He had a Ph.D. in suffering. Grief, speech impediment, illness, persecution, a thorn in the flesh, physical pain, spiritual anguish, shipwrecked, imprisonment. Yet, Paul was the Energizer Bunny of the New Testament. He kept on going, moving through his suffering, even seeing his suffering as a form of God’s blessing and encouragement.

The Bible discusses many types of suffering, even more than what Paul experienced. If you read through the Bible, you’ll find many folks dealing with depression, affliction, grief, death, illness, physical pain, mental anguish, spiritual desertion, agony, loneliness, confusion, when God seems absent, the dark night of the soul, the disorientation of doubt. All of these are sufferings discussed in the Bible.

And here’s what is amazing: Jesus suffered every one of them. Every single suffering. Jesus cares very much about us when we are afflicted because he also was afflicted. He is our suffering servant, our afflicted Lord. He suffered and by his suffering he is our

hope and deliverance. He has been through and endured any suffering we ever could face. He wants to be our hope, our rock, our example and our encouragement.

I believe this is the most important outcome that God intends for all our afflictions, to encourage our reliance on Christ.

God is always doing 10,000 things in our lives and we may be aware of two or three of them. But few are more important than weaning our trust off ourselves and placing it onto Christ.

Sometimes it requires affliction to reveal the ways we rely on ourselves instead of God. Yes, God does give us more than we can handle. But it is to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God.

In today's Gospel text, Jesus goes into the wilderness and is tempted for 40 days. Our 40-day Lenten season parallels the 40-day temptation of Jesus.

Lent demands that we look clear-eyed at our lives and ask: Where am I tempted to place the things of God at my service? Where am I tempted to worship all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor, the outward trappings of success, rather than seeking the inner authority that comes from worshipping God and serving only God? Where am I putting God to the test? In what ways am I tempted to turn these stones into bread, using whatever gifts God has given me in order to secure my own survival and success instead of loving and serving comforting others?

Suffering humiliates us. Life is a series of humiliations. But the good news is that every movement toward the humiliation of our false selves is a step toward resurrection.

Jesus was tempted. Jesus suffered. Jesus passed all three tests and thus the devil left him because Jesus could not be used for lesser purposes. Suffering calls us to rise up to a higher purpose.

This morning, this first Sunday of the holy, penitential season of Lent, hear this good news: Friends, there is nothing that you have done that will ever erase God's blessing. You are God's beloved child in whom God finds joy.

Yes, we suffer. Yes, it seems like God sends us more sufferings that we can handle.

But we follow a Lord who suffered. Why would we ever think we can avoid suffering if even our God suffers?

Please know that God is with us. Jesus was well acquainted with suffering; he was a man of suffering. Through his suffering, we are healed.

God comforts us in our sorrows so that we can comfort each other with the consolation we ourselves have received from God. Amen.