

SERMON SERIES ON SUFFERING
CONCLUSION
“THE MEANING OF SUFFERING”

Today is the final Sunday of Lent, so this is the final sermon in our series on suffering. Thank you for not applauding...

Finding hope in suffering has been our topic. As a parish, we have been reading and discussing the classic book, Man's Search for Meaning, by concentration camp survivor Viktor Frankl.

Suffering is not an easy topic, certainly. But no one gets out of here without suffering. We are not promised a suffering-free life. It comes with being alive.

I do not know a way around suffering, but I do know a way through it. In the last resort, we have a Lord who suffered. This will be made clear to us in the coming days leading up to Easter. We will remember his betrayal, his arrest, his being whipped, tortured and tried, and in the end, his death on the cross.

Jesus suffered. We recently studied the suffering of Jesus in confirmation class. I asked the class why did Jesus have to suffer? And one student said, very quietly, but with confidence: “For us. Jesus suffered for us.”

Here is a God who stands alongside us as involved. A God who identifies with us. The result and the reality of suffering is evident, once and for all, on the cross. All the horror, cruelty and the suffering of the world are on full display on the cross. Nowhere do we see it more clearly than in Jesus' suffering and dying, that God is a God for us. A God completely on our side.

Not a fear-creating, theocratic God from above, but a benevolent, compassionate God with us below.

Not a cruel legalistic God, but a God encountering us with redeeming love. A God who does not demand love but bestows love.

God is love, we say. God's love for us was best revealed when God sent into the world God's only Son, so that we would have life through him.

There are many who believe God is aloof and abstract, beyond all suffering in apathetic transcendence, but instead God's compassion has been revealed to us through Jesus' passion on the cross.

There are many who believe in an abstract judge of a God. But we have a God, who in Jesus, unconditionally embraces our suffering, making it possible for us to endure our suffering, knowing suffering has meaning and that we will finally be victorious in the end.

God's love does not protect us from all suffering. It protects us in all suffering.

The victory of God always rings out to me in the last few pages of the Bible, in the Book of Revelation where we read of this tender scene:

“God will be their God. God is with them. God will wipe away all tears from their eyes; there will no more death and no more mourning, no more sadness. The past has gone. Behold, God is making all things new.” (Revelation 21:5)

In our congregational Lenten text, Man's Search for Meaning, we read that suffering ceases to be suffering the moment it finds a meaning. Viktor Frankl, the author of the book, writes that the meaning of life is found in every moment of living. Life never ceases to have meaning, even in suffering and death.

Good Friday is but a few days ahead. We make a bold claim as Christians, that suffering is redemptive. That God suffers with us. That by the suffering of Jesus, we are healed.

Conclude with story from Man's Search for Meaning, page 69:

“The story of the young woman whose death I witnessed in a concentration camp. It is a simple story. There is little to tell and it may sound as if I had invented it; but to me it seems like a poem. This young woman knew that she would die in the next few days. But when I talked to her she was cheerful in spite of this knowledge. "I am grateful that fate has hit me so hard," she told me. "In my former life I was spoiled and did not take spiritual accomplishments seriously." Pointing through the window of the hut, she said, "This tree here is the only friend I have in my loneliness." Through that window she could see just one branch of a chestnut tree, and on the branch were two blossoms. "I often talk to this tree," she said to me. I was startled and didn't quite know how to take her words. Was she delirious? Did she have occasional hallucinations? Anxiously I asked her if the tree replied. "Yes." What did it say to her? She answered, "It said to me, 'I am here-I am here-I am life, eternal life.'”

— Viktor E. Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning