

The topic of my homily this am/pm is SUFFERING...Suffering is a topic you can preach about for hours. ...Don't worry, I won't be like the long-winded Baptist preacher who went on about suffering for over an hour and his congregation thought he was never going to end...Finally, he says, "I really have a lot more to say,...but Jesus is telling me to stop,...and I always listen to Jesus, so I'll end here. AMEN!"...The choir leader then announced, "Let's stand and sing, *What A Friend We Have In Jesus.* "

Ok, I'm going to start with a question...Do you think God sends more suffering to people who are worse sinners? You know, the greater the sin, the greater the punishment...If you do, raise your hand....All right, it seems that most of us don't buy this idea that God comes down harder on bad people than He does on good people...I guess that's because we've all seen good people get hit with some pretty big troubles, ...while some rotten people get off lightly, haven't we? ...So we know God doesn't work that way. ...But there were many people back in Jesus's time – like some today - who wrongly believed that if God sent suffering down on someone, that person must be a bad sinner. ...Several places in the Gospels, Jesus sets them straight as He did in today's Gospel when he refers to two horrible events: Pontius Pilate slaughtering a group of innocent people who were worshipping in the temple,...and the collapse of a tower killing 18 people in the town of Siloam...Jesus asks,..”Do you think those people were worse sinners than everyone else?”...and He answers,”No,I tell you...No!”

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told the people, “God makes the sun shine on the bad and the good,...and He sends rain on the good and the bad.”...No one – good or evil –escapes pain and suffering in this life. ..Of that, there is no question...But there is a question on suffering that's a lot harder to answer. ...It's one that has puzzled the human race for centuries...It's one that non-believers often cite as proof that there is no God ...It's one that even troubles people of faith....**It's this:** If God is the all-powerful, all-knowing, all good and loving Father Jesus says He is, then how can He allow so much suffering every day all over the world? ...When we look at the pain and suffering all around us and in our own lives,...we can't help asking WHY? ...Why does God let it happen if He has the power to stop it?...Why does God let it happen when the Bible and Jesus tell us He loves so much?

If we think about some of the horrible evils of the last century –the Holocaust,... the killing fields of Cambodia,... the genocide in Rwanda,...the over 55 million abortions in the US – can we help but question: *Where was God in all this?*...I remember after the events of 9/11,... people coming to our church to pray, and one of our youngest parishioners and one of our oldest came to me and both asked: *Why did God let this happen?*...We watch TV coverage of earthquakes and tsunamis in which thousands die, and we wonder: *Why didn't God stop it?*...We see a picture in *Time* magazine of a mother in North Africa during a devastating drought and famine,... holding her dead baby in her arms,...looking pitifully up to heaven, tears streaming down her face...and we can't help asking: *How could a loving God let this baby die and leave its mother in agony when all that was needed was rain?*...*Why didn't God make it rain?* ...We read the statistics of how a billion people in the world lack the basic necessities of life, and we wonder, *"Why doesn't God care?"*

All of us – except the very young – have seen pain and suffering close up...Maybe even experienced it ourselves:...Someone we love enduring the ravages of cancer or Alzheimer's or other terrible diseases...Young people with their whole lives ahead of them, struck down by a stroke, automobile accident,...suicide...Babies born with serious problems,...Loved ones battling mental illness, depression, addictions...Families fractured by divorce...I'm sure you could add to this list of personal pain.

We accept that suffering is part of this life...and we will never make total sense out of suffering, because as Isaiah reminds us: "God's ways are not our ways..." But I'd like to spend a few minutes sharing what has helped me make some sense of suffering...from what I have seen myself and from what I have learned from some wise and holy people.

Ok, let me ask this: what is the thing of greatest value in the world?...LOVE!...Through Jesus Christ we've been shown a God whose love for us is unbounded,...and who created us to love the same way...That's why God granted humans total freedom...We are free to choose to love or not to love God and our neighbor...If love isn't our free choice,...it's meaningless...But with this freedom comes the possibility that some will choose hate over love, and evil over good. ...People who choose to do evil cause human suffering...God has the power to stop them, but He won't because that would take away our freedom. ...Unless we are free to choose good or evil, no REAL love can happen...Make sense?

Bad people doing bad things doesn't cause ALL the world's suffering...Some pain we bring on ourselves and others by the poor choices we make...Most suffering, though, happens because we live in a fallen, broken, imperfect world...It started out perfect,.. then Adam and Eve sinned and opened up a Pandora's box of troubles for themselves and all who come after them...The world is out of whack because of humanity's sin...One day Jesus will return to set it right. Until then there will be disease, accidents, disasters, famines, death...God made a world of bunny rabbits, flowers, sunsets, life. We messed it up.

OK, we accept pain and suffering are part of life... What's harder to understand is how the good and loving God Jesus showed us when He said, "Whoever sees me, sees the Father,"...can sit by and watch so much suffering in the world - some of them horrors that go on day after day - and not lift a finger to make them go away...Why would a good and loving Father just let them happen? ..Well, as a father, there were times when I could've stopped my child's pain, but I didn't....I remember taking my 2-yr old son to the doctor to get a shot that was going to really hurt...He didn't understand that the shot was to help him get better...All he knew was it hurt and that I could've stopped the nurse from doing it,...but I didn't...."Doesn't my daddy care?"...Of course, I did...It hurt me to see him suffer...I knew it was for his benefit,... but his 2-yr old understanding was limited.

And compared to the all-knowing God of the universe, our understanding is even more limited. God's wisdom is infinitely greater than ours,...so it isn't hard to believe that a loving God could allow a terrible thing to happen because He foresees that in the long run more good will come of it than if He miraculously made it go away....God showed us very clearly how this can work when He allowed His Son to suffer and die on the cross even though He could've stopped it....He let it happen so that the gates of heaven would be open to undeserving sinners like you and me...And if it happened there,...if the worst evil in history - the killing of God's Son - could result in the greatest good,....then it can happen elsewhere, even in our lives... Great suffering leading to great good.

Good coming from suffering...I think most of us - especially those of us who've been around awhile - can identify some time of suffering that brought about considerable good...As we were going thru it, we might have said, "I really don't see how this can accomplish anything good,"...but looking back we saw how it brought us closer to God...As we cried to God for help, it made us acutely aware that we couldn't do it on our own...we needed the strength & the courage only He could give, to get us thru it.

In 2Cor 12, St. Paul pleaded with God to end his suffering,...& God said, no...He told Paul that it is when we are weak that we are strongest,...that's when we realize where our strength comes

from - our trust in the Lord...God uses difficult, challenging experiences to help us grow in faith & strength...to prepare us for the next time,...& to be an example for others.

Maybe the answer to the question of suffering is not to try & figure it out, ..but to compare these two things:... on one side of the scale all the pain & misery of the world...On the other side of the scale, the face of God – the God who went the extra mile,...who practiced more than He preached, ...who entered into our world,..& took on all the pains of the world,...the God who is available to us when we seek Him in the midst of our pain...We will see that the good of God,... the love of God,...the presence, the closeness of God....will heavily outweigh all of the sufferings of this world...AMEN!