

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

September 5, 2021 – PENTECOST 15/ PROPER 18 – YR. B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Suffering: A Gift from God?*”

Isaiah 35:4-7a	(God’s salvation will break forth in the wilderness)
Psalms 146	(Praise for the Creator who cares for His own, faithfully and forever)
James 2:1-10, 14-17	(Believers are to show no partiality, and do what they say)
St. Mark 7:24-37	(Jesus heals a woman’s daughter, and a deaf man)

In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus mercifully casts a demon out of a little girl who was being tormented by it, and heals a man who cannot hear. Since St. Mark (RSV) also records that the afflicted man “had an impediment in his speech”—or, as another translation (NIV) puts it, “could hardly talk”—we can infer that he had lost his hearing sometime after childhood. We’re not told how long the man was deaf. Like many of us, he may have been suffering for years... or, if only for a little while, his hearing loss surely would have been a distressing hardship.

I’m fairly certain that if we took a survey of every person present here today, whether male or female, young or old, each of us could list the ‘demons’ we’re battling or the physical ailments that dog us: A sore shoulder; neck pain; a chronically bad back, knee, or hip; a sports injury that keeps twinge-ing long afterward; arthritis; headaches; reflux; sciatica; high blood pressure; heart murmurs; cataracts; ingrown toenails; depression; anxiety; addiction—you name it. Why? Because the nature of the human condition is to suffer.

Just read the ancient Psalms or the Book of Job, and you will see this has always been true. So, instead of asking the question, “Why do we suffer?” what if we asked, “How would life look if we did not?” What if everyone stayed strong and well, hale and hearty, and free of pain? Try to imagine for a moment how proud, obnoxious, and self-sufficient we would all become. “Hey! I never feel bad! Nothing’s holding me back, I can conquer the world, and I don’t need anyone’s help to do it!”

St. Paul understood this dynamic. In 2 Corinthians 12:7, he confesses: “in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.” Scholars have speculated endlessly as to what was wrong with Paul—suggesting everything from depression to deviant sexuality. In any case, Paul is clear that the Lord permitted him to remain afflicted in some way, to prevent him from becoming overly proud of the divine revelations and other gifts of the Holy Spirit with which God blessed him.

Think about it. When we’re not well or strong, we need help—both from God and from each other. Pain, illness, or distress can either draw us closer to God and one another, or push us away. Again, St. Paul understood this. In Eugene Peterson’s translation, *The Message*, Paul says: “Satan’s angel did his best to get me down; what [he did in fact] was to push me to my knees. No danger then of walking around high and mighty! At first I didn’t think of it as a gift, and begged God to remove it. Three times I did that, and then he told me, ‘My grace is enough; it’s all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness. Once I heard that, I was glad to let it happen. I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. It was a case of Christ’s strength moving in on my weakness. Now I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer’” (2 Corinthians 12:7-9).

I won’t pretend it’s easy to look at our own aches, pains, syndromes, or diagnoses, or the massive suffering and global hardship we are witnessing, and think of these as gifts from God. If you paid attention to the news last week, you might have thought humanity was living through hell on earth. The 20th-century British author G.K. Chesterton, in his book, *What's Wrong with the World?* wrote: “Not only are we all in the same boat, but we are all seasick.”¹ We find ourselves overwhelmed and paralyzed by all the dreadful, tragic stories we are hearing, about which we feel we can do nothing, and about which we wonder where it will all end.

So, what’s the cure for our “seasickness”? With his customary realism, early in 2021, Pope Francis reflected on St. Joseph’s acceptance and courage in the face of inexplicable circumstances—Mary’s mysterious pregnancy—stating: “Only the Lord can give us the strength needed to accept life as it is, even when we fail to

understand it completely.” Earlier (2018) Pope Francis had proposed that a way out of our despair or apathy is the “creative courage” to find a way to act in any given situation—to try to prayerfully discern how we can be part of the solution. Once again, G. K. Chesterton spoke to our plight: “We men and women are all in the same boat, upon a stormy sea. We owe to each other a terrible and tragic loyalty.”

Because we’re all in this life and world together, the Lord calls us to express our loyalty to one another by helping in whatever way we can: Prayer; charitable donations; sensitizing others to approach with compassionate hearts the massive suffering so many are experiencing; appealing to our political representatives; or whatever it is God gives you to do.

God never promised us perfect health, or a life without suffering. We already had that in the Garden of Eden—but we forfeited it because of our pride and disobedience. What the Lord has promised us is that He will never leave us or forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:6), and, that at the end of our earthly life, He will take us to be with Him in heaven forever (John 14:3). In the meantime, God gives us the grace to endure, and friends, family, and fellow parishioners to comfort and cheer us.

Mustering our creative courage, perhaps we could learn to pray as St. Clare of Assisi did: “Lord Jesus, thank You for the privilege of suffering a fraction of what You suffered on the Cross for me, and I ask for the grace to suffer for Christ even as He suffered for me.”

In trying to cope with the unprecedented hell on earth we are witnessing both within our borders and across the globe, another resource may help to sustain us. You can Google it on YouTube or order it from Amazon. It’s a song made popular by Josh Groban, called “You Raise Me Up” It goes like this:

When I am down and, oh my soul, so weary;
When troubles come and my heart burdened be;
Then, I am still and wait here in the silence,
Until you come and sit awhile with me.

You raise me up, so I can stand on mountains;
You raise me up, to walk on stormy seas;
I am strong, when I am on your shoulders;
You raise me up... To more than I can be.

There is no life—no life without its hunger;
Each restless heart beats so imperfectly;
But when you come and I am filled with wonder,
Sometimes, I think I glimpse eternity.

You raise me up, so I can stand on mountains;
You raise me up, to walk on stormy seas;
I am strong, when I am on your shoulders;
You raise me up... To more than I can be.
You raise me up... To more than I can be.²

Yes, we hurt and are sad; we are tired and frustrated; we nurse secret sorrows; take pills that don’t help, and see doctors that don’t take us seriously. We stand by, helpless and heartbroken, as others suffer and die, are stateless and homeless, and lose their lives and belongings in fires, floods, and storms.

But thanks to the resurrection power of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and His all-consuming love for us, and to the compassionate care we have for one another, despite whatever we are suffering, God can raise us up to more than we can be. We have only to do what Jesus commanded the deaf man’s ears: “*Be open!*”

Our Lord also asks us to rejoice in the hope that is ours in the life to come, where there will be no more crying, sickness, death, or pain, when all will be taken up into the surpassing glory of God, in comparison to which our paltry weaknesses and the world’s sorrows will be utterly forgotten.

Until then, may Jesus, Our Great Physician, either heal and deliver us—and all who are in distress—from all that troubles us and them, or give us both the grace to endure what we must, not for our sakes, but for Him who gave His very life for us. Amen.

¹ G.K. Chesterton, *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton Volume 28: The Illustrated London News, 1908-1910*.

² Graham Brendan Joseph and Lovland Rolf, “You raise me up,” [musixmatch.com](https://www.musixmatch.com) © 2021 <<https://www.musixmatch.com/lyrics/Josh-Groban/You-Raise-Me-Up>> 31 August 2021. Used with permission.