

What God in Christ Assumed: Our Suffering, Our Sin, Our Death
Luke 22:14-23:56

“Then Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.’ Having said this, he breathed his last.”

What does it matter, day in and day out, to say that God in Christ assumed our suffering and our sin? And what difference will it make, when we breathe our last, to believe that God in Christ bore in his body the death we must die?

Listening to Luke’s story of Jesus’ last week of mortal life, we can imagine, because we are human, Jesus’ joy on the edge of sorrow, the sting of critics, the urgency of time left, the bittersweet company of friends, the agony of pain anticipated, the wounding betrayal of someone once trusted, the disappointment in a loyal friend simply out for himself, the hope against hope of not being put to the test. We can imagine, as well, Jesus’ experience of being let down in his hour of greatest need, being utterly misunderstood, being thrown under the bus by a colleague, being mocked and insulted and falsely accused, being treated with contempt, being broken physically, being utterly alone in the world. You are fortunate, indeed, if you have never experienced any of these things. But if you have, you know how profoundly isolating suffering is, both physically and emotionally. You know the abyss into which you fall as your world contracts to include you and your pain. A central fact about pain and suffering, Elaine Scarry writes in her book *The Body of Pain*, is its power to destroy “a person’s self and world, a destruction experienced spatially as either the contraction of the universe down to the immediate vicinity of the body or as the body swelling to fill the entire universe.”

Yet because God in Christ assumed our suffering from his birth to his death, the profoundly human experience of utter aloneness in suffering and pain has been redeemed and joined by the God who in Christ is with us and will not abandon us. Because God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself precisely where and when the darkness threatens to overtake us, we may live trusting that the creator of the heavens and the earth, the one who rescued Israel from Egypt, the maker of promises, the giver of the law, the caller of prophets, and the Father of Jesus Christ--that particular God--has taken our sufferings as his own, has borne our infirmities and weaknesses. For us he was despised and rejected, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

Why does that matter? It matters because, in every valley of the shadow of death before our last, you and I are accompanied by the God who, in Christ has gone before us. It matters because in the middle of all of our anxious days and hopeless nights, we are accompanied by the God who, in Christ, has defeated every death-dealer intent on separating us from each other and from the love for which we were made. It matters because, on any given hospital gurney, we are accompanied by the God who, in Christ, has assumed all that we suffer so that, literally, neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor powers nor things present nor things to come nor height nor depth nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

But the other way to hear the story of Jesus’ Passion this morning is to confess that *we* are the ones in the story who are Christ’s critics, who are letting him down, misunderstanding him, throwing him under the bus, mocking, insulting, falsely accusing, him, treating him with contempt. And if we do not think we are those characters, just remember that when we do these things to the least of these, as individuals, as a church, as a nation, and God knows this is what we are doing daily as a people, we are doing them to him. The biblical term for the separation that we create and

presently glory in between ourselves and our neighbors, as well as the separation we know between the caricatures of human beings we have become and the human beings we were created to be, is called sin. In this week, Jesus assumed our sin and its consequences as his own without sinning—without ceasing to be one with God—and so in Jesus, God reconciled us to God while we were yet sinners.

What this means and matters to sinners is where my mind begins to be blown. It was necessary, Scripture says, that Jesus suffer at the hands of sinners, sinners who were his friends, sinners like us, who were “born and socialized into...a culture run by death,” writes former Dominican priest James Alison. “[T]he imagination which dominates us [is] an imagination run by rivalry, resistance to change, the longing for security, and by the need to protect ourselves against death by seeking our survival at the expense of others.” Was this not the death that was at work in the characters who populated the last week of Jesus’ life? Is this not the death that is at work in us?

Yet Jesus’ first words from the cross in Luke were, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Alison writes that atonement—being reconciled to God—is not a theory but is something we undergo. “If you are *undergoing* atonement,” he writes, “it means that you are constantly in the process of being approached by [God in Christ—often in the guise of one you have wronged] who is forgiving you.... We tend to try to resolve this by saying, ‘Oh, it’s not being forgiven that matters. It’s forgiving: I must forgive!’ So we work ourselves up into a moral stupor, straining ourselves to ‘forgive the bastard,’ [Alison’s word]...But in fact the Christian understanding is the reverse: it’s because we are undergoing being forgiven that we can forgive; The process of being forgiven,” Alison says, “looks like the breaking of heart....In other words, we’re being given a bigger heart. That’s what being forgiven is all about.” To be sent into the world as big-hearted people: that is what it means and matters, day by day, that God in Christ assumed our sin.

Why, then, I have asked myself this time of year for the last forty-four years, why could Jesus not simply have assumed our suffering and sin by accompanying sufferers and forgiving sinners for years on end, dying of old age? Why was it necessary that he also assume our death on the cross? Robert Jenson asks that same question after discounting every theological theory proposed in the history of the church. “Most directly stated,” Jenson says, “the Crucifixion is what it cost the Father to be in fact—and not just in somebody’s projected theology or ideology—the loving and merciful Father of the human persons that in fact [we are]. It is all very well to say that God is omnipotent Love; but here we sit in sluggish mutiny, stirring only to seize swords and staves....Christ’s suffering is the anguish God undergoes [the anguish God is presently undergoing] to be actually merciful within history; it is the pain of truly loving us...[with] a love that is perfected as love unto death...no lesser love being able to keep us.” Why did God in Christ assume our suffering and sin and death? Because the love God is, is the love that chooses to love unlovable us, eternally. Thanks be to God.