

## **2024 10 20 – God in the Midst of Suffering**

**Scripture: Job 2:1-10** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Today we are going to be talking about suffering. This is obviously not an easy topic, but it is something that each and every one of us has experienced in our lifetimes. So let's begin by reviewing some of the types of suffering that occur in our world. What are some of the things that can cause pain and suffering in our lives? (wait for answers: physical or mental illness, injury, loss of loved one, loss of ability, loss of job, loss of freedom, divorce, children leaving home, depression)

I was doing some research on the Internet this week and I found a website that described the Buddhist understanding of suffering. In Buddhism there are three levels of suffering: 1) physical pain, 2) impermanence, and 3) spiritual ignorance. Physical pain results, of course, from illness and injury. Impermanence is the suffering we feel when we lose something or someone that we have loved. Spirituality is connected to our ego, our understanding of self and our connectedness to the Sacred and to the rest of Creation. Spiritual Ignorance is an unhealthy ego and it can lead to pride, greed, envy, gluttony and all the other deadly sins. Spiritual ignorance causes a different kind of suffering, the pain of being separated from the Ground of our Being, from God.

<https://integralyogamagazine.org/the-yoga-of-suffering-its-philosophy-and-practice/>

In today's scripture reading, Job is experiencing the first level of suffering: he has been afflicted "with painful boils from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head." It disturbs him so much that he is scraping his skin with a piece of broken pottery to distract himself from the greater pain or itching of the boils.

If you are not familiar with this story, you may not realize that in the first chapter of this book Job has already experienced great suffering. In the reading today, you heard YHWH say, “His integrity is intact—even though you incited me to ruin him without cause!” Job has already experienced the second level of suffering to a degree that we can only imagine. He was a rich man with a large family and many camels, oxen, donkeys, sheep and workers. And he lost everything. He lost his 10 children and all of his wealth. Only his wife remains. His suffering is incredible!

So we have a pretty good idea of what suffering is, but why does it happen? In today’s story the author is suggesting that Job’s suffering happened because YHWH was boasting to Satan about Job, his faithful follower, and Satan convinced YHWH to put Job to the test, to see how faithful he would be in the midst of suffering. The first test was one of loss and the second one of pain.

This makes for a good story, but that’s what it is, a story. It might make sense if you believe in a God that sits up in heaven directing everything that happens on earth. But then you would have to believe in a God that causes fires that wipe out cities and floods that kill hundreds of people, a God that chooses which countries will be at war and which ones will remain peaceful, a God that determines who will get cancer and who won’t. A God that decides when he “needs another angel in heaven.” I don’t believe in that kind of God.

I believe in a God that is the Essence of Love. I believe in a Holy Mystery that is ever-present and ever-loving, a Spirit of Love that is within us and all of creation,

the Ground of our Being that is with us in our decision-making, but does not control us in any way. I believe in a God whose power is Love, a love that can support and strengthen and guide us when we open ourselves to its goodness. I believe in a Holy Mystery that suffers when we suffer and celebrates when we celebrate.

Sacred Love doesn't cause our pain and suffering. Pain and suffering are a natural part of living. Harold Kushner, the famous Jewish Rabbi who wrote the book, "When Bad Things Happen to Good People," said it this way,

Pain is the price we pay for being alive.  
Dead cells – our hair, our fingernails – can't feel pain;  
they cannot feel anything.  
When we understand that, our question will change from,  
'Why do we have to feel pain?' to  
'What do we do with our pain so that it becomes meaningful and  
not just pointless empty suffering?'

<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/6669708-pain-is-the-price-we-pay-for-being-alive-dead>

Buddhism has a similar teaching which they call the "Five Remembrances."

Thich Nhat Hahn, a Vietnamese monk and author, translated them in this way:

I am of the nature to grow old.  
There is no way to escape growing old.  
I am of the nature to have ill-health.  
There is no way to escape having ill-health.

I am of the nature to die.  
There is no way to escape death.  
All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change.  
There is no way to escape being separated from them.

My actions are my only true belongings.  
I cannot escape the consequences of my actions.  
My actions are the ground on which I stand.

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Suffering sucks and it is inevitable. That is our reality. Sometimes our suffering results, at least in part, from our own actions but often it happens through no fault of our own. As Thich Nhat Hahn says, we “are of the nature to change” and change is hard. No matter how it happens, the pain of suffering is real.

But, the good news is that we do not suffer alone. The Holy Mystery is with us even in those times when we are at our lowest and feel like we have been abandoned. I don't believe, as Job did, that God dishes out happiness and adversity on a whim. But I do believe that the Spirit of Love is with us even in our darkest moments.

In fact, it is often in those moments that we discover the gift of God's love in our lives. I invite us all to think back to a difficult time and consider the many ways that we received help and healing. It is often in these times that God's love is made known to us in a myriad of ways: through caregivers, professionals, family, and friends. When we are at our lowest, we are often forced to accept that we cannot do it alone and we reach out to a greater power through prayers or meditation. Sometimes it is the healing power of creation itself that leads us to a new understanding of what is important, what is Sacred in our lives.

No matter what type of suffering we may endure, the great religions of our world remind us that what is truly important, what cannot be taken from us are the choices we make and the actions we take. In today's story Job, despite his suffering, has chosen to take the high road and accept what has happened to him without cursing God. We can find many examples of people who, in the

midst of suffering, have chosen positive action. Some have even chosen to reach out and help others. I am thinking of organizations like *Mothers Against Drunk Driving* that have grown out of people's pain.

One very obvious example is found in the twelve-step program used by groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous. This program exists because of the deep suffering caused by alcoholism and the 12-steps are positive actions that people take to heal and move forward in their lives. The first three steps of that program are about letting go and letting God. They are about opening ourselves to the power of the Sacred in our lives. The rest of the twelve steps are the actions made possible because of that connection.

No matter what pain and suffering we may be enduring at this moment. I invite us all to reach out to the Holy Mystery, the Ground of our Being and to accept with gratitude the unconditional, the everlasting, the powerful love that is ours for the taking.

May it be so. Amen.