



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Wednesday in Holy Week

#### At the End of This Week

[RCL]: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 70; Hebrews 12:1-3; John 13:21-32

Suffering is not something we do well, generally speaking. Suffering is not something we seek out, not something we cultivate, not something we practice so we can do it even better.

No, suffering is something we avoid—or try to avoid—as best we can.

And, when you come right down to it, suffering is not something we experience that much or that deeply in our privileged lives in twenty-first-century America.

O, there are exceptions, to be sure. But for most of us, what we consider “suffering” are things like being stuck in a traffic jam, or having to wait a long time for food to be served to us in a restaurant, or not finding a free locker at the gym—things that the world’s poor and underprivileged would find very curious indeed.

Their idea of suffering could be more like this: being stuck in an unending cycle of poverty and oppression, having to wait a long time for any food at all, or not finding a day free from back-breaking labor.

Now, *that’s* suffering.

So, how very strange would it be to deliberately, intentionally, and willfully submit ourselves to suffering?

How very odd to admit that one of our closest friends or associates will betray us—and not just allow that to happen, but actually *encourage* it?

And how very outlandish to say—once that betrayal has been put in action, when that suffering inevitably lies ahead—how very outlandish to say, “Now I have been glorified, and God has been glorified in me.”

And yet this is exactly what Jesus does and says, as told to us in this passage from the Gospel according to John.

The sequence goes something like this:

“One of you will betray me,” Jesus says.

Then “Do quickly what you are going to do.”

Followed by, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.”

First, it seems odd that Jesus seems to welcome the betrayal.

Yet elsewhere he is quoted as saying, “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed,” (Mt. 17:22) and “the Son of Man is going as it has been determined” (Lk. 22:22).

Perhaps he simply accepts as inevitable that he will indeed suffer. He’s not exactly enamored of the idea, but he knows in his heart that he cannot avoid his fate.

Then he seems to want to have it over with quickly—a feeling with which any of us could resonate.

If there’s going to be pain, at least make it short. If we must endure agony, don’t let it be for a long time. If there are hard times ahead, please let them be brief.

Then comes the most surprising statement of all, the one about his being glorified, and God being glorified in him.

And, in a way, that’s exactly where we stand on this Wednesday in Holy Week.

We are in the lull between Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem—with palms before him and death ahead of him.

The betrayal is inevitable; in the narrative, it happens tomorrow.

And then the agony in Gethsemane, the trial, the condemnation before Pilate, the carrying of the cross, a crown of thorns, the nailing to the cross, and the crucifixion itself—those three hours of torment in the midday sun.

The suffering will be severe—but brief. The whole cycle begins tomorrow night, and it ends on Friday afternoon.

And then there’s the glory, something we must yet wait for, something we nevertheless seek, something we hope will happen again—and happen anew—this Easter morning.

Is there a message for us in all this?—something more than a lecture in history or a narration of past events?

Well, if suffering is inevitable for the God-made-human we call Jesus, perhaps too it is inevitable for us.

That’s not exactly good news, but it is truth-telling. And our suffering is likely to pale compared with his. Perhaps there’s a word of comfort in that.

And, like Jesus, we hope that our suffering will be brief. With him, we say, “Let’s just get this over with!”

Because after that suffering, at the end of that time of trial, when the dark clouds clear: then the glory of God is revealed.

We are here in the middle of Holy Week, in the tension of a kind of metaphor for life itself:

Amidst the struggle, facing the pain, between the beginning and the end—and awaiting not just the yearly commemoration of the first Easter, but also the final event in the divine plan, something yet to come.

And so, we prepare to move ourselves away from the ashes, that we may be able to greet the Easter dawn.

We move away from sin, and into the new life promised for each of us.

We move away from suffering and betrayal, and into an eternal life of ineffable joys.

We move away even from our old selves, and into a new existence that is more and more in the image of God.

This is our journey—not simply commemorating past events, as miraculous as they were.

But anticipating miracles yet to come.

And appropriating that past into our present, making it come alive for us, as it came alive for Jesus—as a foretaste of the final moment when we are reunited with those who have gone before.

For we know that, even as the horrors of Good Friday lie ahead, we will once again say, “Welcome, Happy Easter” at the end of this week, because we are in the midst of the week when wickedness is put to flight, and sin is washed away.

This week that restores innocence to the fallen, and joy to those who mourn.

This week that casts out pride and hatred, and brings peace and concord.

At the end of this week we get a glimpse of the day of the general resurrection, when we, with all those who are of the mystical body, will be set on God’s right hand, and hear that most joyful voice: “Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

*The Rev. Barrie Bates has served Anglican and Lutheran congregations in California, New York, and New Jersey over the past 20+ years. He holds a Ph.D. in liturgical studies, and memberships in the International Anglican Liturgical Consultation, the Sons of the American Revolution, and the Screen Actors' Guild. Other than ordained ministry, his interests include opera, fine dining, and boating.*