

Sermon for September 3, 2017 (Proper 17, Year A)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 105; Matthew 16:21-28

Title: I Know Their Sufferings

“What will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?” (Matthew 16:26).

My dear friends, I am sure most of you know that the President has declared this day, the third of September, to be “a National Day of Prayer for the Victims of Hurricane Harvey and for our National Response and Recovery Efforts” in the wake of this historic storm.

(<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/09/01/president-donald-j-trump-proclaims-september-3-2017-national-day-prayer>)

What we have witnessed these past 10 days in Texas and Louisiana is historic and horrific. And without a doubt, the effects will linger for years to come.

How are we supposed to respond to suffering as this?

As humans, as Americans, as Christians – how do we make sense of this suffering, and how do we respond to it?

Suffering and what we do about it – I could argue that THIS is the very core of what it means to be people of faith, to be Christians, to be followers of our Lord Jesus.

Of course, the President is right. It is appropriate to pray for the people of the Houston area. We will do that together today and I hope that you will continue these prayers in your homes and privately on your own.

But prayer is not enough, is it?

No, it is not. Prayer is essential. Prayer is the foundation of our spiritual lives, of our connection with God. But more is needed. Action is required.

Today, we heard one of the most important stories in the Bible. Moses at the burning bush. Moses told to remove the sandals from his feet, since he is standing

on holy ground. Moses called to return to Pharaoh and to set the Israelites free. The unspeakable name of God revealed to Moses.

We learn some amazing things about God from this story.

First of all, we learn that God is affected by suffering.

The Lord says, “I have observed the misery of my people... I have heard their cry...I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them” (Exodus 3:7-8).

God sees, God hears, God understands, God has compassion, and this compassion compels God to act.

THAT is beautiful. It is good news and it is intended to inspire hope in all of us. The One who dreamed you up, and brought you into being and has sustained you until this moment – this Creator is not aloof and disconnected, but is aware of our human suffering and has compassion.

But, at the same time, we also learn something crucial from this story about HOW God acts to alleviate suffering.

It’s plain to see, isn’t it? God works through those people who accept the call.

For whatever reason, God chooses to act in and through human beings who respond to the divine call.

Did you notice the detail in the text which set the entire story in motion?

“When the LORD saw that [Moses] had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush” (Exodus 3:4).

There is a cause-and-effect here. It was only AFTER Moses stopped and turned that God called out to him.

It’s almost as if the text suggests to us that the bush had been there burning all along. All the time! And it is only because Moses stopped and turned aside to look that the voice called out to him from the bush.

That’s just pure speculation, of course, but there is no question that the openness of Moses is a key to this story.

Moses turns to look. He removes his sandals. He responds to the heavenly voice. And he engages with God.

Perhaps he is not the best possible candidate! We'll never know, but Moses himself goes on to raise 5 objections to this calling.

But none of these matter, because this is how God chooses to work! Through people like us, flawed and imperfect and foolish. People like Moses who was not a good public speaker at all!

As the great Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, explained it: "It is laid upon the stammering to bring the voice of Heaven to Earth."

This is echoed by the great reformer, Martin Luther, when he explained that "God rides the lame horse and carves the rotten wood."

And isn't this the point of our Gospel reading today?

By the way, as an interesting connection, in this passage the Lord Jesus speaks of his exodus. That's what it is called in Luke's Gospel.

It's called the exodus of the Lord. His leaving, his departure. What we commonly call his Passion, his Passover through the cross.

He explains to his friends that there is no way around this, that he must pass through this crucible of pain and suffering.

But it's not enough for them just to watch him go through this, is it?

This is what the Lord's call to discipleship is aiming at. It is not enough to observe Jesus, just to see what he does and to applaud it, to cheer him on.

For us today, it's not even enough just to gather on Sundays and give thanks for what he did!

It is not enough.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24).

He is looking for people who will do what he did, who will face those forces which bring suffering, to stare them down and do what is possible to lessen the suffering of others.

We are not the Savior. We will never be the Redeemer.

But we have been called nonetheless. And we have been anointed. And we have been sent.

No, it is never enough just to pray. Prayer is essential, but it must lead to action. Moses could not stay in Midian and pray for the Israelites in bondage.

The apostles did not stay in Jerusalem, enjoying the Holy Spirit’s power and presence after the resurrection.

When we see people suffering, it is not enough to simply pray. Prayer comes first, but then we must act!

But not just at times of crisis. What happened from Hurricane Harvey is truly devastating.

But the reality is that more hurricanes are coming. We all know this.

And there will be more earthquakes, and tsunamis, and floods and tornadoes – and devastating wars.

This is the truth: if you are willing to turn aside and look, you will see an endless and varied array of sufferings which inflict our humanity every single day.

Without a doubt, it can become overwhelming.

If we are not careful, our hearts can become hard and we can be tempted to follow the path of Pharaoh and Caesar.

The path of those who use the suffering of others for their own ends.

This is what it means to set the mind on human things.

Pharaoh and Caesar do not care who must suffer in order to accomplish their goals and dreams.

But God cares. God know the sufferings of the people.

God speaks from the bush and says, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt...I know their sufferings" (Exodus 3:7).

And not just the sufferings of the children of Jacob.
No, God observes the misery of all people.

And this is why God has brought the Church to every corner of the earth, because the goal of the Gospel message is simple and yet revolutionary.

The Gospel turns ordinary people into co-workers with God, into people who have the heart to deny themselves and take up their cross, into disciples who have the courage to go back to Egypt, or to walk right into the flood and to rescue the suffering.

My friends, will you share in the compassion of God by denying yourself, by putting aside your personal needs so that you can alleviate the suffering of others?

No matter how unqualified you may feel, will you answer the call to do what you can, to take up your cross – not just now in a time of crisis, but everyday, always praying AND acting to bring healing and wholeness to the world?

May it be so. And may God guide and bless our nation as we respond and recover from this tragedy known as Hurricane Harvey. Amen.