

## **“The Epiphany of Pain”**

**Romans 5: 1-5 Luke 22: 39-46**

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During this Season of Epiphany, we have been thinking about our experiences of the presence, the splendor and the power of the holy in the context of our everyday lives. Last week, you may recall, I suggested that sometimes, we may find ourselves “epiphantly challenged” as the experience of God’s presence is sometimes, slow in coming if it comes at all. Our assignment, none the less, is to try to pay attention, as Annie Dillard notes, to the “beauty and grace that are performed whether or not we will see or sense them. The least we can do is to try to be there.”

That was your assignment last week—to “try and be there,” to be present to the beauty and grace of God unfolding in your life during this past week. How did you do? Any God sightings? Any rapid heart-beats in recognition of the holy?” If not, just keep your eyes and ears open in the week ahead. You never know when you may inadvertently stumble into God.

This morning, I would like to take our exploration of the revelation of God’s presence and power in our lives an important step further. You see, the experience of epiphany is sometimes made known to us in ways that not only are we not looking for, but, given a choice, ways that we would just as soon avoid altogether. Sometimes the revelation of God’s presence comes to us primarily through the experience of deep pain and suffering.

Now, I understand that not many of us would voluntarily “sign up” for this kind of holy encounter. Not many of us would eagerly embrace the prospect of pain or sorrow for the sake of gaining a more intimate glimpse of God. I understand that—and yet, the reality of life suggests that pain and suffering is not optional. It’s there, woven into the fabric of our day to day lives and it will make its presence known no matter how hard we might try to ignore, deny or avoid it. Pain and suffering is a given.

The question is, “What will we learn to do with it?” We will armor ourselves against it and do our best to avoid it? Or, will we learn to see that it too can be a source of epiphany—a means of gaining new insight, new awareness, new clarity about the nature of God and our relationship with God? It is a fundamental question that each of us, in the course of our lifetimes, will answer again and again and again.

We, of course, live in a culture that that goes to great lengths to deny, suppress and avoid the prospect of pain. From the drugs that we take to the television we watch to the video games that we play, the primary goal is often to anesthetize the pain in order to keep it from causing us to suffer. Yet, what if we would choose to see pain not as the enemy to avoid, but as the instructor to listen to and learn from? Is it possible that our pain might actually be our best teacher and that our suffering might become the source of our greatest epiphany?

In our lesson from Paul’s letter to the Romans, the Apostle offers that succinct summary of the sequence of suffering that leads to hope. He writes, **“And not only that, but we also boast**

***(rejoice) in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us."* (Romans 5: 3-5)**

Paul, of course, was no stranger to suffering. It was something that he faced on a regular basis as he proclaimed the message of the resurrected Christ. But, as you trace the message of Paul along the time line of its New Testament witness, you will see again and again that Paul did not attempt to erase the threat of pain and suffering in his life, but instead, actually learned to embrace it as an experience that could reveal the power of God's love overcoming pain and suffering and even death itself. That's why Paul can hear speak of "boasting in suffering" because he understood it ignited a chain reaction that would lead to endurance and then character and then hope and finally, love.

The great irony that is embedded in the witness of Paul is that it was his own suffering, struggle and pain that proved to be his epiphany of the presence and power of God's glory at work in him. It was primarily through his pain that he learned to experience the love that was so great that not even death could overcome it.

I realize that this is a lesson that many of us are not necessarily inclined to learn, but there is a key within it that can unlock the door that so easily could imprison us for life. During one of my morning walks, I was listening to the Eagles and heard a lyric that caught my attention: ***So often times it happens that we live our lives in chains and we never even know we have the key.***

Now, it is such a simple line and yet it holds a profound truth. Whether we realize it or not, we hold the key that can free us from our chains if we make the commitment to listen to and learn from our pain. For it is precisely in the midst of our pain and struggle that we are the most vulnerable and, therefore, the most open to the presence and power of God. Our pain can be the source of our greatest epiphanies.

In our lesson from the Gospel of Luke, we find Jesus in the midst of the great crisis moment of his life—praying in the Garden of Gethsemane before the confrontation that will lead to his crucifixion. In Luke's account of this prayer, Jesus prays that the cup of suffering might be removed, but, nevertheless, asks that not his will, but God's will be done. Luke then goes on to add that the anguish of Jesus was so great that his sweat became like great drops of blood falling on the ground. He also includes a footnote that is not included in the other gospel accounts—namely that Jesus' received the assistance of an angel from heaven that gave him strength.

While I am not quite sure what to make of this note concerning an angel's visitation, I believe that it is fair to suggest that in the midst of this great moment of suffering, Jesus experienced the epiphany—that is the manifestation—of God's presence and power. In the moment of his greatest vulnerability and weakness, he experienced the sustaining and

transforming power of God's presence. And it was enough to enable and empower him to face the sentence of the cross.

What was true for Jesus, can also be true for you and me. Our pain and suffering can be the source of the epiphany that empowers us to live with a grace and a strength and a power that we cannot claim on our own. As you reflect, this morning, over the course of your life's journey, perhaps you can look back and see, at some points along the way, that some of your greatest insights, some of your most noble moments grew out of the experience of great suffering and pain. And while you wouldn't want to relive that pain, you are, nevertheless, the person that you are because you allowed it to shape you.

It's been said that some people allow pain and struggle to **shake** their faith while other people allow pain and struggle to **shape** their faith. Which type of person are you?

I conclude, this morning, with a story from Tex Sample in his little book, "Earthy Mysticism—Spirituality for Unspiritual People."

Some of you may remember that Tex Sample was our guest speaker for a week-end, approximately ten years ago. In this story, the reader cannot help but feel his pain as he writes of his son, Steve's untimely death. Steve had a difficult life—one that included running afoul of the law, alcohol and drug addiction and the restlessness of never quite believing and trusting himself. Sample recalls the sleepless night and the endless attempts to support his on into sobriety, a sobriety that proved so elusive.

By the grace of God, however, Steve—at age 28—finally met Nancy and found, in her, a partner that would walk with him through his own journey through hell. As their love grew, they made plans to be married the following summer. Another rock in Steve's recovery turned out to be the Visions Motorcycle Club—an AA groups that combined their love for riding motorcycles with their struggle to stay dry and work for sobriety. It was, for Steve, an ideal fit—one that provided him with the spiritual home that he needed and the friendships that would sustain him.

For the first time as an adult, Steve's life was coming together. The pieces were beginning to fit and everyone was so pleased for the unfolding miracle that was taking place. Then came the accident on the open highway in a blinding sunset. A truck that didn't see him, pulled out in front of him at an intersection. Steve swerved to protect Nancy and was swept under the truck, dying a short time later.

Moving through this painful and heartbreaking narrative, Steve's father, Tex relates the experience of an epiphany that he encountered during the wake at the seminary chapel where Tex taught at the time. I will let him relay his experience in his own powerful words:

**Quotation (Earthy Mysticism / Page 11 Abingdon Press)**

**There was such an array of people there. Theologians, clergy, staff and administrators of the seminary, people from a variety of churches in the city and its environs, bikers, friends of Steve still strung out on drugs and/or fighting the**

ravages of alcoholism, family, and a wide circle of other friends. They were affluent and poor, black, brown, white and gold, Ph. D.'s and high school dropouts, the religious and the secular, the reputable and the disreputable. The parking lot and the streets around the school looked as if used car and motorcycle lots from every part of town had suddenly come together.

I remember the sustained and pervading sense of support that came from this strange collection of people. A sense of an unbounded Connectedness crossed the chasms of the loss. I thought to myself that with ties like these death had no capacity finally to separate us. The chapel filled with a Reality in which we participated, a Reality made clearer by the strange constellation of people there. I knew that outside that chapel we lived among walls, barriers of difference and otherness; but in the chapel for that moment the walls were broken, the walls were down.

I must not claim too much here. The divisions of the world were still there, but there in that place for that brief epiphany, they were down. While I could never be grateful for all the pain and suffering Steve went through in his addictions, I was nonetheless struck with the people he had brought into our lives. To be glad in grief is a torque of human emotion that requires devastating loss and the advent of an Unexpected Gift beyond our power of anticipation. In the rupture of his death came these sinews of people bridging the torn separations of Steve's loss.

In the lowest ebb of his life, Tex Sample could experience, in the midst of the grief and the pain and the loss, an epiphany that enabled him to see the world as God surely sees it and to experience the love that knows no walls, no borders and no boundaries. As he suggests, this moment of revelation did not last beyond the moment because the walls were still there. But that moment of brief and painful epiphany was enough to shine forever in the memory of this father, offering a sense of gratitude and grace for the life of his son and the victory that was ultimately his—even in the midst of his own death.

The pain, struggle and suffering of life is a given that not one of us can avoid or deny, no matter how hard we may try. We can allow it to shake our faith to its foundations or we can allow it to shape our faith in the transformation it makes possible.

Which choice will you make?

Amen.