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**STUNNED SILENCE**  
Randall Tremba  
October 4, 2009  
27th Sunday in Ordinary Time  
World Communion Sunday  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

**Job 2:1-13**

*They sat with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights. No one spoke a word for they saw that his suffering was very great.*

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This past week I watched nearly all 12 hours of the Ken Burns film, *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*. If you missed it, I urge you to see it next time it is shown. The sites of Glacier, Bryce, Yosemite, Yellowstone, the Petrified Forest, Mt. Desert Island, the Great Smokey's, the Florida Everglades and, of course, the Grand Canyon are simply breathtaking. Those sites and many more like them have transfixed millions upon millions of people in stunned silence.

This planet is wonderful, wondrous, spectacular, fabulous, fantastic, and so awe-inspiring that we soon run out of superlatives.

But there's another side to life on this planet and that is suffering—horrific suffering at the hands of nature. Examples abound. This past week earthquakes, typhoons and a tsunami wrecked death and destruction upon Samoa, Indonesia, Viet Nam and the Philippines. And then there are the reoccurring disasters of famines, pestilence, diseases and epidemics over and over again. Those are natural disasters and, we might say, part of the deal of living on planet earth. Without death there'd be no life.

But is it fair that some suffer more than others?

And then there's the peculiarly human side of evil—the death and destruction we inflict on each other through war and structural violence and oppression. The strong trample the weak time and time again. And how is that fair?

The question of suffering has been on the human mind for a long time. It's been on our mind as a parish more than once. Over that past 12 years we have had to absorb the sudden deaths of four young people and the immeasurable grief of their parents and friends. Many of us still remember George Denchy, Tim Jayne, Alicia Thomas, and Desiree Shields plus other young people in the larger community snuffed out in the twinkling of an eye. And, then there's Mason's sudden, shocking, devastating impairment. How can life be so unfair?

Yes, we know life is hard. It is hard in so many different ways. But why must it also be unfair?

The church is a community of remembrance. And much of what we remember and hold in our hearts is suffering symbolized by the broken bread, the crushed grape, and the cross. At our best we remember the crucified of today's world—minorities, homosexuals, third world children slowly dying in sweat shops, or from preventable diseases or from famine. The Body of Christ takes suffering to heart.

The question of suffering has been on the human mind for a long time. It's probably been on your mind at least a few times. *Why me, why this, why now?* The question of suffering may be *the one single* question that makes us human, the one thing that *only humans* can ask and wonder about but never finally answer.

The Old Testament story of Job was composed about 2,500 years ago. But before it was written it circulated in several oral versions among various ancient Middle Eastern peoples. In case you haven't noticed or didn't know, Job is a stage play of sorts.

Like most good plays it's not meant for mere entertainment. This play tries to illuminate a couple of life's darkest mysteries. *Why do some people suffer more than others? Why do bad things happen to good people?*

Like any good play, and like most of the Bible itself, this ancient play offers *clues* but in the end doesn't provide a *definitive answer*. Over the next couple Sundays we'll work our way through the book and story of Job.

The story of Job suggests that those who grapple with suffering and refuse the first or easy explanations will encounter God in some form or fashion. The story suggests that suffering may, in an odd sort of way, be the most emphatic way we touch the divine. For Job the touch came in a whirlwind, a terrifying experience that both humbled and exalted him.

The story begins with a good and innocent man suddenly plunged into catastrophic loss, grief, pain and suffering. When his friends heard of Job's misery they hastened to his side. And when they saw him they were so shocked they held their tongues. They couldn't speak. They sat in silence for seven days and seven nights.

Would that we could sit beside our suffering friends for even seven seconds without spouting off cosmic theories of good and evil. Mere presence, you see, is priceless. The presence of another human body, a companion, in the hour of suffering is great comfort.

I'll have more to say next Sunday about the existential issues raised in this ancient story. But for today I want to stop and sit in silence with those who suffer. I invite you to bring to mind and into your heart someone or some persons or groups of people near or faraway that are suffering great pain and loss. Let them sit with you for the next several minutes in silence. I'll end the silence with a reading and then we will sing the "Peace Prayer" as we prepare to gather at the community table for our community meal of broken bread and crushed grapes.

Silence

Yes, we remember the suffering. But the Body of Christ remembers something else. Listen to these words from Joan Puls. Pay attention for the last word is the ultimate word.

The cup of suffering has many shapes and a variety of contents. In our tradition, the cup has special significance. It is a communal cup, meant for sharing. We can expect no right or left hand seats of honor, no prerogatives of power or monopoly on truth, and no thrones. But we can have the privilege of holding one another, broken and bruised, in the embrace of our circle, of keeping watch with the dying or keeping vigil with the condemned, of walking alongside the exiled and weary, of standing at the foot of the cross, not in bitterness, but open to the miracle of pending *resurrection*.