

**Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Second Sunday of Lent**

17 March 2019

**“Divine Intimacy through Suffering, Heartache, Trial and
Temptation”**



**Hebrew Scripture: Psalm 27
Christian Scripture: Luke 13:31-35**

I pose a question to all of you this morning. I want you to think hard on it. Can you think of a person who possessed a divine sense of wisdom that has not undergone some kind of profound tragedy or hardship during his or her life? Do you know of any great moral thinker that has not endured profound grief? I can scarcely think of any practitioner of radical love and lived a deep spiritual life in tune with God who has not ‘suffered’. All of those I sense to have had a deep connection with God, whose life I wish to emulate, have encountered enormous hardship in their lives and overcame it.



Saint Patrick. Let me tell you about him. Saint Patrick was not Irish. He was the child of Romans, living in Britain, born in Scotland, during the fifth century. As a teen, he was kidnapped by pirates and sold into slavery in Ireland. In slavery, he herded and tended sheep. During his six year captivity, he turned to prayer.



After a dream in which God told him flee Ireland, he studied as a priest and returned to convert Ireland to Christianity. He eventually became a bishop and today is recognized as a saint, the patron saint of Ireland. With even this short biography, it's apparent that hardship brought St. Patrick closer to God.



Our reading from Genesis (Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18 which we did not read) speaks about Abram who left Ur, his homeland, to travel and resettle in a foreign land. Abram was completely isolated and had no heir. In ancient times, to have no heir was worse than a death sentence, for no one would remember you. To be displaced and to be childless must have caused enormous stress and hopelessness. Yet,

Abram, as Paul so famously quoted, “put his faith in the Lord and the Lord counted that faith to him righteousness” (Genesis 15:6).



Our Psalmist was surrounded. Trapped. Penned-in. About to be killed, actually, “devoured” is one precise translated word (Psalm 27:2). His enemies were all around. Yet, he responded, “Now I can raise my head high above the enemy all about me; so I will acclaim him with sacrifice before his tent and sing a psalm of praise to the Lord” (Psalm 27:6).

Jesus. We heard of his trials and temptations in the desert for forty days.



We know that as soon as he announced his ministry he was almost thrown-off a cliff. He encountered Sadducees and Pharisees, who questioned him intently, trying to trip him up by asking questions that were double-edged swords. In our scripture reading this morning, Jesus was hounded by Herod, the Jewish king, who desired no unwanted

attention from the suspicious Romans nor did he want any rival for his people's allegiance. Jesus knew all the prophets before him suffered torment, travail, exile, and imprisonment by their own people and rulers. Jesus rightly predicted the same for him.



The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. often spoke of his expected violent death. As he approached the conclusion of his last speech at Mason Temple before he was assassinated, “he seemed to be coming to terms with death to an extent that he had not voiced publicly before. King’s voice rose to its highest pitch yet. His eyes blinked rapidly, as he turned his head from side to side. He acknowledged that he wanted to live a long life but that he was resigned to whatever might happen. He said that God had allowed him to reach the mountaintop and see the Promised Land. Then he vowed resolutely, nobly: ‘I may not get there with you. But I want you to know, tonight, that we, as a people, will *get* to the Promised Land!’ He ended with an utterance of religious fervor, saying that he was not worried, that he did not fear anybody,

exclaiming in a final flourish, ‘Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord’”.¹

St. Patrick, Abram, the Psalmist, Jesus, Martin Luther King, Jr. But, I want you to think of your mother, your father, your grandparents. Think of someone in your life that you sense had a deep connection with the divine and seemed to have a wisdom that surpassed human knowledge. I am willing to bet they suffered deep pain and anguish at some point in their life.



You see, it is very difficult, if not impossible to be in tune with God without temptation, trial, agony, hardship and pain. Intimacy with God, more often than not, is forged in the struggle to overcome pain and anguish. There are many reasons for this. If we have no hardship, it is easy to rely solely on ourselves, to be assured of our own capabilities alone and thus have no reason at all to rely upon and depend on God. When there is no dependence on God, there is no need to seek God, and thus no learning of nor feelings for God.

¹ “Martin Luther King’s Last 31 Hours: The Story of His Last Prophetic Speech”, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/apr/04/martin-luther-king-last-31-hours-the-story-of-his-prophetic-last-speech>

Another reason why intimacy with God is engendered by anguish is that when we are good and well, we cannot grow. We are, as Richard Rohr states, “on cruise control”. Yes, we are content and happy, but rarely are we growing. It is by overcoming hardship, travail, temptation, and even agony that we gain additional knowledge, understanding, wisdom and intimacy with God.



Another reason suffering brings forth intimacy with God is that when we have suffered, we possess an increased capacity to alleviate the suffering of others. If we have suffered, we find it easier to be in solidarity, to have compassion for and a greater awareness of how to journey with others that are struggling. I realize that I am often very inadequate as a minister because my life has been for the most part extremely positive and privileged. So, I struggle with solidarity as I lack experiential knowledge.



Friends in Christ, in the wake of the disgusting tragedy in Christchurch New Zealand, *I would never invite, welcome, foster or advocate others' suffering in order to bring them or us closer to God.* I do not believe that God *causes* or even 'allows' suffering to teach us lessons nor does God cause or allow suffering to bring us closer to Godself. But, I do believe that good can come from suffering. I believe that suffering can bring us closer to God.



If you have suffered from mental illness or if you have had struggled with a family member who does, what wisdom have you gained to help others? If you have suffered from alcohol addiction, what compassion have you developed for those who have not yet recovered as you have? If you have suffered poverty, or been a victim of rape or incest, if you spiritually ache as you age and fear your own mortality, if you battle with depression, or if you are wounded by divorce, if you have suffered the recent death of a parent or, God forbid, buried a child - you, whether you are aware of it or not, you have gained a wisdom that many others have not and you have an insight into the pain and therefore have an ability to journey with others through their pain.



Friends, though God does not will nor ‘allow’ our suffering, the scriptures teach us that suffering can be a path to intimacy with God. I hope and pray that if we struggle with an event in our lives that causes us great pain and agony, that we might be the Balm of Gilead that heals the sin-sick world just like St. Patrick, Abram, the Psalmist, in fact, like God through Jesus.

As a nation, we suffered from terrorism on 9/11. New Zealand just suffered terrorism. I pray that through our suffering we will have gained the capacity and the wisdom of God to lament all hatred and foster the healing and well-being of our brothers and sisters in Christ and our Muslim brothers and sisters whose God ‘Allah’ is **the one and the same God** we pray to this morning in this church.

This was the Word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, the people of God responded, “Amen!”