

*“In this world you will have trouble,”* Jesus said, *“but take heart; I have overcome the world”* (John 16:33). We WILL suffer in this world. Face it, there is no sugar-coating it, and as followers of Christ, we are told quite clearly in Scripture that we will have crosses to bear. The world does not welcome the claim that God’s way turns our world’s values upside down. Putting our faith in Jesus does *not* mean that we are taking the easy way out. It is going to be a struggle at times. We still face troubles in this life.

We see in Scripture that Jesus is not exempt from suffering. He struggled in the Garden of Gethsemane, so much that his sweat became like drops of blood. He was arrested. He was abandoned by his closest companions. He was falsely accused of being a blasphemer. He was beaten without mercy by soldiers, and they mocked him, forcing on him a crown of thorns. And then, his hands and feet were nailed to a cross, on which he endured great agony until he breathed his last. As the prophet Isaiah had said, which we heard in our first lesson, Jesus truly was the Suffering Servant. *“He was despised and rejected by others, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.”* (Isaiah 53:3). It is hard for us to face the cruel suffering inflicted on our Savior, so also it is difficult for us to face suffering in our own lives—suffering that comes in this fallen world as a byproduct of caring, suffering caused by sin—ours and others’— and suffering that comes as a result of following the way of Christ in a world that worships other lords.

Our suffering can deepen our faith and move us closer to God and others. In the midst of suffering, we may find ourselves praying more, reading Scripture more, perhaps thinking more about the spiritual aspect of our lives. Through suffering, we come to understand more fully that we are not as “in control” of our lives as we think we are, and we must rely on God and others more than we think we could or should. Suffering can make us more sympathetic to the plights of others in similar situations and can give us a new-found purpose to be a compassionate beacon of hope to those who are feeling hopeless. We may be able to bear witness for people that even though suffering is difficult, it is not the Last Word. Jesus promises to wipe away every tear, and to be with us with a living hope along the way.

Enduring rejection and ridicule for following Jesus can be one of the toughest burdens to bear, but no matter how bad it gets, it is helpful to remember that even when Jesus was being mocked and ridiculed on the cross, his suffering did not cut him off from others. He said, “Father, forgive them,” and he looked with love on John and his mother, and told them to be there for one another. His attitude in suffering was a wholehearted trust in God that allowed him to reach out beyond his own pain.

There may well be practical ways that each of us can be a witness for our faith even when things are not looking good. If you pay attention along your own life’s way, you will discover needs that you can help to address. When we look beyond ourselves, our own personal suffering loses some of its punch; we may instead discover that transformational gift of hope, as we trust, and share God’s loving forgiveness and healing.

I want to share part of a powerful poem that speaks to our Good Friday lives. “*The Lamb is God,*” written by Steve Garnaas-Holmes for his daily reflection and worship resource website, Unfolding Light:

This is not Jesus’ backroom deal with God, finding a loophole, sealing a deal.  
Don’t be blaming God for this wretched thing. That’s our cross we set up, our rules.  
(*I wove that crown. I shouted crucify.*)

This is God going up against our violence, especially the violence we blame on God,  
It’s God coming at our politics, our religion, our economics, our human sacrifices,  
over and over our human sacrifices, our sacred systems of blaming  
things on the weak, the strange, the Other, exposing how neatly we avoid the nails  
by nailing others in the name of God and country, order, righteousness and calm.  
It’s God hollowing out our evil by being our victim.

Watch the story, and see the Suffering One  
go up against all violence, all judgment, all satisfaction with the proper torture,  
(anybody but one like me), watch the Gentle One face our evil,  
face evil in all its presentable outfits, face them all with the terrible judgment  
of forgiveness, with nothing but love, nothing but love,

which, as you watch, it turns out, dies in the end, miserable and alone,  
and alone in all the world able to change it.

Hate doesn’t drive out hate. Only Love, *love alone*, can do that. Although we still must deal with suffering, our own and in the world around us, we can trust the promise that the ultimate power of evil has been undone by the Suffering Servant Jesus. We can trust that we are never alone in our suffering as we remember Christ and his cross. Because of the witness of Easter’s empty tomb, we can trust the promise that his victory over sin, death and all evil is also our victory even now, even now in the midst of suffering. We can hold onto our hope for a day when suffering will be no more and we will be blessed to be face-to-face with our Savior forever and ever. That is the promise of God’s grace, sealed by that cross. Now sustained in hope by God’s Spirit poured into your hearts, you are freed to live out your life in good times and bad, sharing God’s steadfast love in the light of the promise of a world reconciled and made whole.