

Jesus: Our Co-Sufferer

Psalm 22:1-22

Good Morning Church Family,

It's good to be back together with you this morning. We missed you while we were away.

Good preachers will tell you that good sermons take the story of God and apply it to their congregational context. It's about taking the timeless of a God who is active in the lives of humanity and makes that story real to where people are at. It does no good, the good preachers say, to tell the Story in a way that doesn't connect with what people are experiencing. I recall a memorable Easter sermon where the pastor opened by talking about a "recent" article in Time Magazine cover story called, "Is God Dead?" The article from the 1960s, and spent the sermon browbeating those who might question the existence of God. A confusing sermon for an Easter Sunday, to be sure.

As I was mulling over where to go next with this series about Bodies and the Embodied God, the news of the Hamas attack on Israel came over my phone. The news, the fallout, and the toll of human suffering has consumed much of my prayers this week. It felt disingenuous not to acknowledge this from the pulpit this morning. What does God have to say to us when bodies of civilians lay massacred at a music festival in Israel? What does God have to say to us when Israel announces a complete blockade of the

gaza strip? Cutting off food, water, fuel and medicine to 2 million people who live within 150 square miles? For context, that's half the area of New York City. There is great suffering in the Middle East right now, both Israeli and Palestinian bodies, people, lives. Where do we go from here?

You've possibly heard the saying, "Bodies are political before". What is meant by that is politics and the lives and bodies of everyday people are not two separate camps with no crossover. Human bodies influence politics, global decisions and vice versa. An example of this would have been the slave trade in the United States. The fate of the enslaved people's bodies were politicized and commodified. Bodies are political. Further still, bodies are ranked. Bodies of people of colour or indigenous people are often seen as less valuable than other bodies. We can recall the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, or the political resistance by Manitoba leaders in regards to searching the Winnipeg landfill for the bodies of two missing Indigenous women. Bodies are ranked.

The body of our Lord Jesus Christ was the same- politicized and ranked. When Jesus was two years old, his family was forced to flee to Egypt to escape a dangerous political situation that put their lives at risk. Jesus was a refugee. Jesus was a Jewish man who lived in a time when the Roman Empire called the shots. Jesus was a man whose miracles and teachings upset the status quo; he spoke out against Caesar's empire as well as the legalism of the Jewish Leaders. His ideas and teachings were radical in that time and place; Jesus chose to spend his time with tax collectors and sinners; the forgotten and the oppressed. It was these things about who Jesus was and how Jesus

operated that led to his crucifixion; his immense suffering and death on the Cross. We know that bodies, all our bodies, but especially the bodies of oppressed and racialized people suffer. They suffer immensely, through no fault of their own. The children in Gaza and the Children in Israel have done nothing to deserve this suffering. Jesus Christ suffered immensely, and he did nothing to have deserved that. Bodies suffer; Jesus' flesh and blood body suffered.

A few months ago, I was talking with a pastor friend of mine (for context she isn't Mennonite) and we were wondering how the Cross has become the central image of Christianity. It's a bit curious. This symbol of suffering and death, of a bloodied man breathing his last has become the symbol that is widely associated with Christianity. The cross often looks different, depending on which tradition of Christianity you're a part of. Some churches, like ours, have a cross- simple, it can be moved around, it's there, but not prominently. My parents' evangelical church that I attended last Sunday has a very large cross, centred on the wall, in the middle of the stage, and with lights behind it, giving the impression that it's glowing. Catholic traditions often use the Crucifix, an image of cross with the body of Christ hanging on it.

Within Anabaptist, there is often a certain amount of discomfort around the cross and the violence that represents. We, as Anabaptists, believe quite strongly that God came to establish peace and the importance of non-violence to help bring forth God's Kingdom. The violence of the cross can clash with that idea. I also wonder, too, if the cross is a challenging symbol for Anabaptism because of the violent suffering that early

Anabaptist experienced, and certainly too in more recent history, such as the events that led to the Russlander migration. My pet theory is that denominational traditions who have expressed less violence or suffering are more comfortable with the violence of the cross or of singing hymns about the blood of Jesus. What does the cross mean to those who have experienced abuse at the hands of Christianity? What does the cross mean to those who suffer under oppression?

Dr. Susanne Guenther-Loewen, who is one of the co-pastors at Nutana Park Mennonite Church, and a very dear friend actually wrestled with this topic as part of her Doctoral Dissertation. It was in her graduate course on Atonement that I took back in 2019 that I was introduced to the idea of Christ as Co-Sufferer. This theology concept was formed by Womanist Theologians-that is, Theologians who are Black Women, certainly a group of people who know what it means to be oppressed and who experience higher rates of violence and abuse than caucasian women. This school of thought says that the oppressed can find hope at the foot of the cross because the man on that cross, our Savior Jesus Christ, knows what it means to suffer and so we are not alone. Jesus is a co-sufferer, one who understands violence, suffering and oppression. One who suffered on the seemingly randomness of those in power.

In that course, I read a beautiful essay that tells the story of A group of women survivors of sexual abuse who meet in a church basement. Some of them decide to attend the church's Passion play, even though they're not part of the congregation or even "religious." Afterward, one responds, "This cross story...it's the only part of this

Christian thing I like. I get it. And it's like [God] gets me. He knows." It's this story, "*not* nicer healing tales or Easter's glad tidings," which both resonates with their experiences of suffering and "lift[s] them up" as being understood by a God who has suffered trauma."

Friends, Jesus knows what it is to suffer in body, and that, I hope is as much of a comfort to you as I as it is to me.

My social media feed this week has been filled with people commenting on the situation in Israel and Gaza. A lot of strong feelings, understandably. It is hard to watch such suffering, to feel the randomness of it, the senselessness. I was saying to Taylor; it's hard to read the news and I get frustrated with all the commentary people are offering. People, many of whom, are like me, Christians, and many of whom, like me, don't really have skin in the game. I don't personally know anyone in the middle east; I don't know how it feels to be an oppressed Palestinian or an oppressed Israel. What is the response that God calls us too? I don't feel like God is calling me to share my opinions about it on instagram. How do we respond to this large-scale suffering? Hot takes online? I think that We can do as Jesus did, in his own suffering on the cross: we can lament.

Psalm 22, which Roger read for us this morning, is one of the more famous Psalms of Lament, or crying out to God. It's famous because both because of the depth of the lament and also because it's a prophetic Psalm towards Jesus' death. The opening lines

of the Psalm, “My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?” are the same words that Jesus cries out from the cross. We can meet suffering with lament.

NT Wright, a biblical scholar, and a former Bishop of the Church of England, offered these words of faithful wisdom towards lament in an article he wrote for Time magazine in the spring of 2020, just as the scale of suffering that COVID would bring was becoming clear. He writes, “No doubt the usual silly suspects will tell us why God is doing this to us. A punishment? A warning? A sign? These are knee-jerk would-be Christian reactions in a culture which, generations back, embraced rationalism: everything must have an explanation. But supposing it doesn't? Supposing real human wisdom doesn't mean being able to string together some dodgy speculations and say, “So that's all right then?” What if, after all, there are moments such as T. S. Eliot recognized in the early 1940s, when the only advice is to wait without hope, because we'd be hoping for the wrong thing? Rationalists (including Christian rationalists) want explanations; Romantics (including Christian romantics) want to be given a sigh of relief. But perhaps what we need more than either is to recover the biblical tradition of *lament*. Lament is what happens when people ask, “Why?” and don't get an answer. It's where we get to when we move beyond our self-centred worry about our sins and failings and look more broadly at the suffering of the world. It's bad enough facing a pandemic in New York City or London. What about a crowded refugee camp on a Greek island? What about Gaza? Or South Sudan?”

In an interview about this article, Wright said that he received an email from Time asking “Can you tell us what the Bible’s answer to this pandemic is? 700 words please.”

“So I basically said there is no good Christian answer for this except lament. And I said the Bible gives us plenty of lament. We lose that because half the churches these days don’t sing the Psalms and the Psalms give us the laments. And the point about lament is that we’re not telling God what he ought to be doing and we’re not telling one another what God is doing. We’re saying, “Hey, what’s going on? This is not the way it should be. Do something.” So Psalm 44, Psalm 88, etc. These are hugely important, and I notice that Paul is referring to Psalm 44, one of the classic laments, in Romans 8 when he talks about the groaning of all creation and us groaning and the Spirit groaning within us and God knowing, etc. You’ve got Psalm 44 in mind throughout the whole thing and I got all sorts of, you know, not exactly hate mail, but, “Doesn’t N.T. Wright read his Bible anymore” kind of mail because people were saying, “Read the prophet Amos. If evil happens to a country, it’s because they have done this and this and this. And so isn’t it obvious that the pandemic has happened because...” And then you kind of rattle off a list of the things that you are probably preaching against anyway, “It’s because those people have been doing these bad things.” And so that, that seems to me classically the wrong use of the Bible, because take the Bible as a whole and yes, if you do crazy stupid things, bad things may happen and don’t then blame God as though it’s random. But read the Book of Job for goodness sake and read those psalms of lament. There are many, many times when, as with Jesus in Gethsemane, you know, or on the cross,

“My God, why did you abandon me?” And if we’re not prepared to face that apparent randomness, then we’re not actually being faithful to scripture itself.”

Last Sunday, the small crowd who was here for worship, watched a beautiful sermon by Dan Epp-Tiessen who was a long time professor at CMU. In that sermon, Dan suggested that a way through great sorrow is to offer praise to God. He found the Psalms of Praise to be the most comforting through the death of his child. And I think that we need both Praise and Lament as we bear witness to suffering in this world. What is so beautiful about the Psalms, I think, is that its chapter after chapter of honest human responses to God as they walk through this world. To be faithful disciples means to be honest with God about what is happening; to cry out in lament and praise to the One who promises, beyond all else to be with us, even to the very end of the age.

To close our sermon this morning, I’d like to offer this prayer of lament and intercession for Palestine and Israel which was published by Mennonite Church Canada. Please join me in lament

God of love and justice, our hearts are perplexed, paralyzed and broken at the recent carnage in Palestine and Israel. We lament the loss of life and the suffering of so many innocent people on both sides. We are shocked at the inhumanity of soldiers and militants, especially when they act in the name of God.

We lament that our prayers for peace seem to go unanswered. We wish you would intervene. We cling to your promise of a different world, but we see so few signs of its fulfilment. Why?

In our feeble faith, we declare your desire for life and for peace.

Holy Spirit, strengthen our resolve to advocate for peace, justice, equality, and compassion for all. Don't let us turn our face away.

Comfort all who are overwhelmed with loss—loss of life, loss of homes, loss of safety and security.

God of the vulnerable and the oppressed, neutralise the power of tyrants in their thirst for domination and control. Renew the strength and resolve of leaders committed to nonviolent resistance and change.

Remember the Christian communities in the land where Jesus walked and where the church was born. May their witness to your love remain bright among their Muslim and Jewish neighbours. May they recognize your hand in their lives, even amidst the suffering.

God of all nations, guide our own government in responding in ways that support the legitimate rights of all, especially those who are most vulnerable, those who continue to suffer after decades of occupation, dispossession, and denial of basic human rights.

May your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Yours is the kingdom, the power, the glory, now and forever. Amen