Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost All Saints’ Church

September 23, 2018/Proper 20 Year B

Jeremiah 11:18-20 James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Psalm 54 Mark 9:30-37

Dear Lord, we thank you for all the ways you sustain our lives. Amen

Our Scripture this morning points to a pressing issue we all struggle with: How do we understand senseless suffering, slaughter and death? How do we endure our despair over our helplessness? How do we lean on our faith in the midst of evil?

Jesus is letting his disciples know about his death- he, an innocent man, is going to be murdered by the forces of government, and yet, he is willing to put himself into evil hands. He tells his disciples three times, specifically, that this senseless death is coming.

After his first prediction (we read last week), Peter attempts to “rebuke” Jesus about this very bad idea. Jesus in turn rebukes Peter, and then Jesus warns his disciples that those who follow him must ***deny themselves and expect to suffer persecution***. Hmm, not what they were expecting.

Next week, in what will be Jesus’ third prediction, the sons of Zebedee argue that it will be they who secure places at Jesus’ right and left, separating themselves from the other “less deserving” disciples. Jesus puts an end to this sham, this arrogance, by saying that ***those among you who desire to exercise “authority” must be as slaves and servants***. Your authority comes not as boss, buts as a servant. Yikes! What’s Jesus thinking?

And this week, after Jesus’ second prediction, the disciples argue about who is the greatest among them. Greatest to them is judged by who is closer to their image of God- In other words, who is most like God- God who is omnipotent, powerful, in control, ruler of all, judge, with lightning bolt accuracy against the unrighteous? Who is most like that? And they are arguing among themselves.

“Think again,” says Jesus, “if you think you have the ***right*** image of God,” and puts a child in their midst. ***“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”*** Jesus is not giving children a special dignity, nor is he being sentimental. Nor is this about “out of the mouths of babes” comes naïve honesty. Like when my sister, when meeting my grandmother’s best friend, said, “Oh my, you’re fat.” And when she said, “Oh, what did you say, dear?”, and my grandmother without missing a beat said, “Oh my, she said, what a great hat!”

Jesus’ object lesson of putting a child in the middle of them is not about the wisdom of children, or that children matter, or that they are precious in our sight. No.

Children, in ancient societies were seen as burdens until they grew up. And many did not make it to adulthood- facts of life’s cruelties. Jesus puts a child in the disciples’ midst to say, ***“your sense of self is rooted in the indignity of powerlessness***.***”***  The child cannot exist without the help of others. This dependent creature is a key to understanding God.

It’s yet again another example of the reversals that will take place in the Kingdom of God, always challenging our way of thinking. ***The Kingdom of God is recognized in suffering; authorized by servanthood, and welcomed through powerlessness***.

This is Jesus’ answer when we ask what are we to do in the midst of senseless suffering, slaughter and death. Answers that have to do with suffering, servanthood and powerlessness.

Not easy, if not impossible. What do we usually do to answer our questions about evil?

One of the first responses, much like Peter, is to simply deny. This can’t be the right answer! Fix this God. Do what is right and protect the innocent.

Another response, much like many of the psalmists or like our prophet Jeremiah this morning, is to pray, “God, please smite the evil ones. I’m on your side, God, so please set your retribution on my enemies. I will trust in your final justice.”

Or we recite Paul’s letter to the Romans, chapter 8, verse 28: And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”

I’ve relied on all of the above. Many of us have. They are a part of our tradition. But they are not getting to the full wisdom of Jesus answer. There’s more to Jesus than that. And in our attempt to understand what that “more” might look like, we do one thing, as a way of being faithful, as a way of making sense of things that actually makes no sense, that actually Jesus would challenge and not accept.

It’s when we say, “God has God’s reasons.”

The first time I heard this phrase and rejected it was when I was in the pew at a funeral. A ten-year-old boy had crawled out of a tiny space in his bedroom’s air conditioning unit on the 23rd floor of a high rise apartment in NYC. He was playing, exploring, and while on the ledge, slipped and fell to his death.

I am now more sympathetic to the preacher’s dilemma; he wanted to help in time of great pain and agony, but that was not his role. I remember sitting in that pew and becoming noxious as he talked about God’s “reasons.” I wanted to scream. I wanted to run up to the mother and father and just hold them and cry with them and to let that be some kind of solace. I wanted to tackle the preacher in the pulpit- to shut him up. A child’s death is never part of God’s plan. Jesus never rationalizes senselessness or evil as God’s reason.

To make his point, Jesus walks right into evil with his own senseless death at the hands of sin and says, our response is ***“to recognize suffering as real, acknowledge servanthood as our response, and to welcome our powerlessness in the midst of it all,”*** and then let God be God.

One of my favorite books is *Just Mercy,* by Bryan Stevenson, who writes about his experience securing justice for prisoners condemned to death row. One of the stories he tells is about Anthony Ray Hinton who was released in 2015 unanimously by the Supreme Court of the United States after being on death row for almost 30 years, wrongly convicted.

I was talking with Louise Howlett, one of our priest associates, about the book, and she said that the Dublin School had Anthony Ray Hinton come up from Alabama to tell his story. The children were completely taken up by his experience of injustice and overwhelmed by his power of hope which he writes about in his memoir, *The Sun Does Shine: How I found Life and Freedom on Death Row.*

And they had so many questions! One question that really moved Louise, was when a student asked Mr. Hinton if he was going to try to marry now that he was out of prison. There was a long pause and he said, “I look pretty normal, and I can talk and relate with you about my experience, and about my hope and about your beautiful lives, but those long years in a 5x8 cell on death row has left me damaged. I don’t have the capacity to form intimacy with a woman to love as my wife. It wouldn’t be fair to her. Too much has happened to me.”

One of the things that happens with that kind of honesty and vulnerability is that it opens up for all of us our own capacity to face our own brokenness. Broken….. Mr. Hinton let the students see, yet he also let them see that that brokenness did not define him. Crucified…. Yet, he will not be held down by that crucifixion. He is more than the cross.

By being able to embrace his brokenness, he gave the students the invitation to be open to their own wounds and fears and limits. And to also know they are more than their brokenness as well. And when that happens, our brokenness creates a desire for mercy, and the need to show mercy to others. Suffering is transcended. In our powerlessness, we find the capacity to serve. That’s what we mean when we talk about resurrection.

In other words, Mr. Hinton exposed the Christ to those children, and in the experience of the Christ healing begins. They left their conversation with him, and understood better the suffering of the world, the senselessness of much of it, and their capacity to care more for the abused, the neglected, the disabled, and the traumatized.

Imagine what the world would look like if we could all recognize the humanity and mercy that resides just on the other side of brokenness. This is why Jesus died…. He walked into our pain. Yes, because of sin and senseless and evil, he died, but not to fix us, or save us from damnation, but rather to give us a way to live, full of mercy and hope.