

Suffering and Hope: A Christian Perspective

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"God is already here
Can't you feel his presence
He's already here
All you've got to do
Is open up your heart
Because He is already here."

So sings the choir as they process in on Sunday morning, swaying with the cadence of the music and filled with joy in the presence of the Lord.

"Precious God, we thank you for being here this morning. We thank you for this day, for opening our eyes. We went to bed last night and you watched over us while we slept. You awakened us, allowing our eyes be opened to the wonder and glory of this new day. Thank-you. You gave our bodies movement, allowed us the strength to get out of bed, the ability to put on our clothes and get ready this morning. Thank-you for the clothes that we have and for the strength to put them on. And thank-you for the food that was in the cupboard when we opened up the door to make our breakfast. Thank-you for giving us the will to come here, to your house, to be together in worship and in praise.

We remember all of those whose lives are so much harder, who are in pain, who struggle. Be with those who could not get up this morning. Comfort those in too much pain to be here. Watch over those who do not yet know you, who do not know to come here to your house, who have not been saved, and yet whom you love still. Grant healing for the wounded, and companionship for the lonely. Watch over those in prison, grant them the faith that will sustain them in the difficult times. Give us the strength to be your witnesses and messengers of your healing love and saving grace.

We thank-you for the gift of your son Jesus who walked among us, healing, teaching, saving lost and sorry souls. May we be carriers of his love, and witnesses of his healing saving power, that your work and your will might be done on earth as it is in heaven. All this we pray, in Jesus name, Amen."

So prays the Deacon as he opens the worship service, and invites us all to sing together the next hymn.

Wednesday evening after Bible study, the prayer meeting begins. The small classroom is crowded with 15 people sitting in folding chairs. It opens with song, a cappella. Hymn books

are available, and folks call out the numbers of hymns they'd like to sing. The separate voices mingle as they find their key and forge a single sound of harmony and praise. People read passages from scripture as the spirit moves them. More often than not, they read from the Psalms. When the quiet settles and the deacon leading the prayer meeting senses that the reading time is over, he asks what prayers people would like lifted up.

Sister Jane tells of a woman in her office who is battling with cancer and asks for our prayers. A member of the group speaks a prayer for her. Sister Dorcas tells us that she is scared. She goes to court in the morning trying to get back her kids. She gave them up to DSS when she lost her job and became homeless. Now they are with foster parents who have changed their phone number so she can't call. The court wants her to come with documentation that she has housing, a job, and has had a series of urine tests to demonstrate that she is not still using drugs. She starts to cry. She doesn't have the money for the urine tests. She gave up her children voluntarily because she wanted them to have food, and secure shelter. Now she can't get them back. We pray for Sister Dorcas and her children. Later she tells me that she is sharing an apartment with a couple, and she just caught them "using" and doesn't know what to do. She tells me she goes into her room and closes the door. Her using days are over. I listen, and pray that she will continue to have strength and resolve, guided by God and her love for her children.

Sister Jessie tells that she needs our prayers because on Monday she is going to have a week of chemotherapy. It is the fifth treatment segment, and she knows that the following week she will be too sick to cook or take adequate care of her ten year daughter. She thanks God for the time she has to share with her daughter, and for the people and the church she has found at Zion since moving to Lynn last year. She asks for our prayers, and for us to call her during the next couple of weeks to make sure she and her daughter are okay. We pray. We copy down her phone number. At the end of the meeting, I tell her that I will bring her over two casseroles during the week when she is likely to be sick. When I do that as promised, and visit to her at home, we pray again, offering thanks, and opening ourselves to God's healing presence.

Wednesday evening prayer meeting continues. Brother Melvin asks our prayers for his family. He has five children. Several months ago he'd made his oldest son who was using drugs leave the house. Now the son was back. They'd made a covenant. The son would not do drugs, would accompany the family to church on Sundays, and would respect the family's rules, including a curfew. Melvin thanked God for this second chance and asked us to pray for the family and its healing.

A few more friends, co-workers and family members are lifted up. Some special blessings are noted with Amens and Alleluias. A healthy birth is marked by one, and a first wedding anniversary by another. We close the meeting with prayer and song. God is good.

Women's choir practice. Friday evening, at 6:30 many women come straight from work. They are tired. We gather in a circle for prayer, offering thanks and asking blessings. And then, we sing. We work hard. It sounds good. Sister Alva has a deep resonant voice. She sings with the "thirds". At one point we all hear something special stirring in Alva's song. We stop and let her carry it alone. We stand in the presence of the Holy Spirit, and we know it. When she is finished, she speaks. She wants us to know that her grandson's brain tumor had just been scanned, and is shrinking significantly. She acknowledged to the women that she is often cranky and irritable. That she has been critical and even unkind at times. And still the people have accepted her, held her, and prayed for her, her family, her grandson. She is grateful. God is good.

Sister Mabel sits next to me in choir practice. She tells me how her son died unexpectedly last

year when he was only 53. Her husband is in a nursing home. We might say that she is alone, except that she knows that God is with her. If she forgets that God is always there, she is reminded every week at Zion. Sister Mabel's voice is failing, but Women's Day is coming up, and they let her have a little solo, which makes her beam with pleasure. As Mabel struggles to give volume to her tired voice, the choir leans forward, poised to encourage. It is only rehearsal, but it is clear that God is already here.

Sunday morning at 9:30 Sunday School begins. Men, women and children gather in the sanctuary for a brief devotional service. Each week a different class is responsible for leading the devotions. We break up into our classes. There are about 25 people in the adult class studying Deuteronomy. We are trying to understand why it was taking so long for the people to be allowed into the promised land. Someone talked about what it must have been like to be wanderers without a home for forty years. Sister May stood up. She spoke slowly and carefully. A few years ago, Sister May had become unemployed and homeless. She and her five year old daughter spent nine months living in Boston shelters while she tried to find work and a place to live which was clean and safe. Eventually, through a friend, she learned of the apartment in Lynn where she now very happily makes her home. She tells us of the anguish and the suffering of living as a homeless person, the pain and frustration of being unable to provide appropriately for her daughter. Every day for nine months she prayed for God to help her, to help her find a job, help her find a home, help her find the strength and courage she needed to go on. Every night she and her daughter went to bed in another shelter. Disappointed, demoralized, she thanked God for another day they were safe, another day they had shared, and hopefully for a new day to come in which better things were possible. God did not fix her life, but God was there, companioning her while she figured things out and got her life straight. She'd learned a lot in the process. Maybe that was something like what the people of Israel experienced in their wilderness experience, she mused. And they, just like she, would be ready and able to settle down as God's people when they finally came home.

After Sunday School, the congregation gathers again. Each class says something about what they learned. A child leads the unison benediction. People mill around and take a break. It is almost time for worship.

During worship this Sunday it is Deacon Hosea who offers the altar prayer. He reminds us that God knows what is in our hearts, knows what we need, and for what it is we long. He is from Africa. Sometimes it is difficult to understand him. But his prayers are of the heart, and all of us who gather feel the tenderness and passion of a man who loves God and loves us. Through him, we feel the love of God for us. It becomes easy to understand what it means to know the love that God has for us through his son Jesus whom he sent. Hardened hearts are softened. God is already here.

After the service Deacon Hosea asks me if I will write to my legislators. The temporary immigrant status of his people is about to expire and there are strong efforts afoot to not renew it. That would mean that many of his friends and family would be send back to their homeland in Africa where they would most likely starve or suffer severely. The country is very unstable. I promise I will write and pray.

Once a month Zion is signed up to prepare and serve the meal at the soup kitchen in Lynn. Monday it is our turn. While other church groups supplement the food which the kitchen already has on hand and works with the kitchen's paid cook, Zion does it differently. Once a month Zion shops, prepares, cooks, serves and cleans up a huge traditional "down home" chicken dinner to serve 250-300 people. Fifteen to twenty people, men and women, old and young, wash, cut up

and prepare chicken, salad, buttered bread, corn and whatever other side dishes they fancy. They don't just feed the homeless and the poor, they prepare for them as you would for company. They laugh and joke as they work, and take pride in what they are preparing. And they offer prayer and praise to a God who is good all the time. One knows that they understand in the core of their being what Jesus meant when he said "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink." God is already here, and that presence is unmistakable.

You asked me to write about hope and suffering from the Christian perspective. I cannot really do that any more than I could talk about hope and suffering from the Unitarian Universalist perspective. In truth there are many Christian perspectives on hope and suffering. Some are sophisticated theological perspectives, written down, expounded with clarity and logic. And many of those espoused theologies have little impact on the living faith of Christians who hope and suffer in the world. That is not to say that there are no functioning and viable theologies of hope and suffering lived in Christians' lives. There are. They are the "salt of the earth" theologies passed through not only the fire of thought, but more importantly, the fire of life in all its moods. These theologies are found in story, in biography and the narrative of the people. That is where I chose to begin.

Through this narrative, I have begun to answer the question which I glean as the deep and urgent one embedded in the larger, vaguer and more abstract question of generic Christian hope and suffering. Theology as I know it, theology as it matters and makes a difference, is theology as biography - the divine indwelling and its impact on people's lives. So this is a theology of specificity, accountable to the lives of the people who have lived it.

I write my Christian perspective on hope and suffering grounded in the ways in which I witness my community of faith, Zion Baptist Church, being a people of God, joyful and hopefilled, even in the midst of suffering. It is not hard science. It is only an "n" of one. Consider it a case study, the place where the rubber hits the road, or where, in the language of our discipline, the divine and the human intersect. I think it is valid. After all, Jesus too, was only an "n" of one.

In what I write I am deeply effected by the suffering of those whose lives touch mine. Just this week in prayer meeting one woman shared her pain as a single mother of a thirteen year old boy who has a disrespectful mouth to her and to his teachers, who does not apply himself to school and the things he ought, who is on the verge of getting thrown out of school and the after-school tutoring program, and who, in his youthful impatience looks longingly at the freedom and the excitement of the streets. She is scared. He is the last of her five children. She knows that as an African American male his chances of ending up in jail are high. His chances of ending up engaged in criminal behavior or substance abuse are high. She makes him come to church. But she doesn't know what else to do. She worries he might become violent. Other parents offer their stories and their need for prayer. In the light of the first sister's tale, another shares that one of her sons is in prison for life for a crime she is convinced he did not commit. She breaks down crying. Another tells us that her 12 year old grandson is dead - a boy in the wrong place at the wrong time. How can you ever understand that? The tales of sorrow and fear, frustration and powerlessness weigh heavy. And the group becomes a single body of sympathy and love. They speak of God's love and God's companionship. They are certain that with God those who struggle can find the strength they need. There is no false reassurance about how it is going to be okay. There is no speaking of platitudes suggesting that their pain is for a reason, or distancing themselves by suggesting that they have brought it upon themselves or in any way deserved it. They are people who suffer, and their God suffers with them. They do not succumb.

Dorothee Soelle observes that "That 'God is always with the one who is suffering' entails not only consolation but also a strengthening: a rejection of every ideology of punishment, which was so useful for the cementing of privilege and for oppression." I think she is right. This theology of the cross, of a God who knows what it is like to be oppressed, to be betrayed, abandoned, reviled, of a God who suffers with the people, disarms the companion attack on dignity which suffering often visits on those who suffer. If suffering did not diminish the dignity and personal power of Jesus, it need not diminish ours either. That becomes a significant strength in the effort to endure and even transcend suffering. Convinced of self-worth, of self-dignity, of being a beloved, precious and beautiful child of God, suffering loses its demonic power. By severing suffering's power to diminish the human soul and spirit, this theology has also retained for those who practice it, their access to their resources.

That brings me to the second and companion element of Zion's lived theology. It is a theology of abundance. No matter how depleted or discouraged I might feel at 9 a.m. on Sunday morning, after church I feel energy, hope and the power of possibility. God is able. And with God I am able too. The transformation begins with the invocation by the deacon. As he names so many of the ways in which I am the recipient of gifts and blessings, of the tools and opportunities I have before me in my life, and the support and nurture which has carried me, acknowledged or not, I am reminded that indeed I have resources. That I breathed while I slept, awakened in the morning, that I had a roof over my head and food in the cupboard, that I was able to get out of bed, get myself dressed, and make my way to church, are all resources. That I could think and laugh, cry and dream, are all part of the abundance of gifts with which God has blessed me. It could have been otherwise. God didn't have to or need to. God did that out of God's abundant love and care and positive regard for us fallible, sometimes vain and even foolish creatures. And we can count on that. We may not get what we want, when we want it. This is God's world, and things happen in God's time. But the confidence in the goodness of God, and that in the large picture and the fullness of time, all will resolve for the best and good will prevail, gives suffering a temporary status in the context of eternity, and therefore, is contained. Lives given to Christ, given to God, are not contained by the temporal or temporary. They partake of the divine eternity. Waiting is possible. Action is possible too. Should anyone stand up in the pulpit on Sunday morning and say, "God is good," the people in the congregation will shout back in one strong voice, "All the time." And if the speaker nods, responding "All the time." They call once more, "God is good." And they mean it. When you have a God who is good, eternally good, abundantly good, graciously, generously good, and when that God is also able, you are strong and your hope resilient.

Soelle, in discussing the response of the Frenchman Lusseyran to his dreadful suffering at Buchenwald notes: "Lusseyran's power is so unbroken, his acceptance of life as a whole so strong, that he doesn't waste a single thought on avoiding suffering or evading it. The theodicy question is superseded here by an unlimited love for reality."

Clearly Lusseyran's faith has developed a depth and a maturity which few of us have mastered. I am not suggesting that the average person in the pew at Zion, (or myself for that matter), has developed such a powerful sustaining faith. What I am proposing, is that some of the elements which must be in a theology which could develop and mature into faith such as Lusseyran's are present here. It is the right seed. It produces a plant which could bear that fruit. Just as walnut trees will never bear apples, let alone pumpkins, certain theologies do not have seeds of such a powerful and sustaining faith which could trust God so completely as to love reality without restraint. When Jesus asked us to love our enemies, and to love our neighbors as ourselves, I

believe he was pointing to this kind of stance.

Now I invite you back into the week of my case study. A few days later I open my Boston Globe and read with shock about a woman and her ten month old baby who were found dead in their home which burned to the ground in Sharon, I had married that woman and her husband about ten years ago. Every year they sent me a Christmas card and had sent me announcements of the births of each of their three children. Because they had been unaffiliated when I'd married them, I made some telephone inquiries to insure that some pastoral care would be available. They are now active members of the Sharon UU congregation. I sat down to write a note of condolence and support. How much harder it is to offer comfort to a generic Unitarian Universalist. As the Sharon congregation is mostly humanist, I could not presume to offer the comfort of a companion God. I could speak about the community of love and support in which the bereaved husband and father was held, which I did. But I believe in my heart of hearts, that he will be facing dark nights of his soul to which friends do not travel, and in which they probably are not welcome. In that dark and lonely place of anguish and solitary suffering, I want him to know that "God is already here." Our UU language fails me. The language of inherent worth and dignity and of interdependent webs offers little. It does not say much to the experience of abject dependence. It has no weight against the hurt inflicted hemorrhaging of the spirit that can only be stanchd with the grip of infinite mercy. In a reason based theology, the question, "How can I live?" struggles for an answer that sustains. I am not saying that generic Unitarian Universalism cannot address suffering. I am only saying that it is difficult. And as a phenomenon that grew out of the North American white middle class, it has not seriously been asked to.

What is the Christian theology-in-use which is sustaining the people at Zion? I am not asking about their doctrines, their espoused theologies discussed in books. I am asking what is it they live? What of their Christian faith strengthens them in the face of years and generations of inevitable and of systematically inflicted suffering. They have survived. They have survived in the face of racism, classism, anglocentrism, inferior schools, uninspiring expectations, and the grinding corrosive effect of substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and dead-end jobs. They have survived with more joy than many who suffer less.

I think that they survive with hope and joy because their God is here, their God is good, and their God is able.

There are two powerful narratives in the Biblical tradition, the story of the Exodus culminating in the settlement in Canaan, and the story of Jesus of Nazareth who becomes the Christ. These stories are filled with pain and sorrow, with suffering and anguish, with disappointment and disobedience, and they are filled with love. God loves the people. Through all of the hard times, people suffered, people learned, faith deepened. It was possible because God was already there. The people were cherished. God wanted them saved. God wanted them well. God wanted them to know how to be a holy, healthy, God loving, wonder filled joyous people. They know it because that is their story as Christians.

Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, in her book *Holy Hunger* says:

"What kind of a story heals? A story that is both loving and true. True, because nothing essential is left out, neither the pain nor the joy. Loving because everyone in the story - narrator, protagonist, and characters alike- is seen with compassionate eyes."

For Zion, and for me, the Biblical story is a healing story. We moderns often cringe at the violence, the raw exercise of power, the harsh demands of obedience by God on the people. As

has been our want to clean up and sanitize fairy tales, we want to remove the ugly and disquieting parts of the Biblical story. When we do that, we rob it of its power to heal. "What kind of a story heals? A story that is both loving and true. True, because nothing essential is left out, neither the pain nor the joy. Loving because everyone in the story - narrator, protagonist, and characters alike- is seen with compassionate eyes."

That is the story that the Christians at Zion Baptist find in the Bible. In Exodus, in Deuteronomy, in the Gospels, in Acts, in Paul's tales of woe wound together with words of encouragement, they (we) find a story in which nothing essential is left out, the pain or the joy. The people have known it all. God has too. And they have received the story of a God and a people who may have flinched, but have not run, who have strayed, been lost and found, who have proven that through it all, God, whose other name is love, God, whose other name is justice, God, whose other name is compassion, forgiveness and a wide expanding heart, that God, is already, and dependably already here. Because of their trust in that kind of God, suffering can be endured, and hope springs eternal.

H. Richard Niebuhr, in his classic book *The Responsible Self* says:

For salvation now appears to us as deliverance from that deep distrust of the One in all the many that causes us to interpret everything that happens to us as issuing ultimately from animosity or as happening in the realm of destruction. Redemption appears as the liberty to interpret in trust all that happens as contained within an intention and a total activity that includes death within the domain of life, that destroys only to re-establish and renew. Insofar as that interpretation prevails against its negative counterpart we begin to understand all that happens to us and to which we react as occurring in a final context of life-giving rather than death-dealing, as occurring in a universal teleology of resurrection rather than a universal teleology of entombment. Our response now is to commandments given with the promise of life rather than the threat of death; it becomes response to action that holds before us the sure anticipation of glory - not our glory but the glory of all being....The ethics of death is replaced by the ethics of life, of the open future, of the open society."

The average parishioners at Zion never heard of H. Richard Niebuhr. The average faithful attendees of Bible study on Wednesday nights and Sunday School on Sunday mornings are not studying Niebuhr. They merely study the text and ponder what it meant to the folks who wrote it, and what it has to say to their present lives. They are theologians, untrained in the language of the discipline, but intensely present to their lives. They are theologians of the flesh and spirit. They live their answers. How surprising that they, in their grounded, experience-centered theology, have found themselves in the company of one who was the Sterling Professor of Theology and Christian Ethics at Yale Divinity School. They might be impressed to know what company they keep. I am impressed to find in a scholarly theologian an espoused theology which is also practical, in use, animating and saving people's lives.

Dorothee Soelle, in her book *Suffering*, speaks about the three dimensions of suffering : physical, psychological and social. She notes that real suffering can occur in any of these dimensions. She lifts up Simone Weil's distinction between suffering and affliction. For Weil, the experience becomes affliction when the suffering is endured on all three levels. The people at Zion know those many faces of suffering. Because they are a community of people of color, all of their experiences of physical and psychological suffering are mediated through the social matrix of racism, from which the church can provide a comfort and to which it can provide a

challenge, but from which the church cannot protect. The physical, psychological and social dimensions of suffering are real and present. They are acknowledged and not denied. But there is another dimension to people's lives which is the most significant. The spiritual dimension. The life of the spirit is nurtured and nourished. The preciousness of the person in the sight of God is affirmed. Every Sunday morning at the end of the Children's Message, as the young ones return to their seats the congregation sings:

"Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world.

Red and yellow, black and white,

They are precious in his sight.

Jesus loves the little children of the world."

God, and God's love, is already here.

Soelle says: "All extreme suffering evokes the experience of being forsaken by God." I am unsure if this is not an instance of circular reasoning. If persons are not having the experience of being forsaken by God, does that by definition exclude them from the category of persons in extreme suffering? If that is the case, then it is impossible to demonstrate how persons in extreme suffering have transcended or endured it with God's help. I believe her statement is too closed to be of use. However, I would accept that persons in extreme suffering do have to struggle with the questions and uncertainties of God's presence and continued care for them. The struggle is probably common to all of the faithful who suffer in the extreme. Their answers are not all the same.

The Jesus story is very important here, as a guide and strength in this time of vulnerability and despair. Knowing that even Jesus questioned whether or not God had forsaken him, allows the believer the certainty that he is in good company in his pain. He or she is not alone. God knows and understands, because when God became flesh and walked among us, separating from the Godhead, in extreme suffering, even that enfleshed divinity had difficulty in trusting and experiencing God's presence. Jesus' moment of doubt and anguish becomes the open door, assuring the one in pain that such doubt is human, allowable, and even has been shared and understood by that which is divine. Not only is God already here. God was there, has been there, has known the anguish of the suffering not only as lover and compassionate healer, but as fellow sufferer, transcendent and victorious. In Jesus we have the ultimate friend, who taught us the ways of salvation, and died in the process. Jesus taught us to trust in God's presence when all seems lost and we feel forsaken. Jesus taught us not to be defined by our suffering, but by our faith, our trust and our hope.

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39)

Nothing can separate us from the love of God. God is already here, every moment or every day of every life. And God is good. All the time.

God is good and God is able.

This day then, that the Lord has made, calls us to rejoice and be glad in it, now and forever more. And let the people say, "Amen."