

A Lent 5  
April 6, 2014  
Poulsbo  
Pastor Alison Shane

Ezekiel 37:1-14  
Psalm 130  
Romans 8:6-11  
John 11:1-45

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I spent the last four days travelling to and attending my Aunt Fran's funeral. Fran was my mother's sister, and she had been suffering from pancreatic cancer. For reasons too complicated to go into here, Fran's symptoms had gone unchecked for far too long, so that the cancer was in advanced stages by the time she got medical care. There was nothing the doctors could do for her except try to make her as comfortable as possible as the cancer claimed her life. She was in considerable pain, and hospice managed that pain wonderfully. Once hospice got Fran's pain mostly stabilized, Fran went home, and lived out her days being nursed 24/7 by her granddaughter, Tiffany. As the pain worsened, however, and the pain medication thus increased, Fran became less responsive. About two days before her death, however, Fran became agitated, and best guess was that she was in pain that morphine couldn't relieve.

And Tiffany wondered how God could have let that happen. With all God had done, why had God allowed Fran to suffer so badly for the last two days? Where was God in Fran's suffering?

It's Martha and Mary's question, too, though they phrase it as a statement: Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. It's a statement of faith in Jesus' power, but it is also an accusation. Where were you when we needed you? Where were you in our suffering?

And Martha finds no comfort in the knowledge that Lazarus will rise again in the resurrection on the last day. She wants him there NOW.

If you have experienced the death of a loved one, you might identify with Martha here. We believe in a God of power. And we believe in a God of mercy. But when there is suffering, we begin to doubt both.

But the thing is, while the witness of scripture is that God is all-powerful, it also points out that God has chosen to limit use of that power in this creation, so that we, God's creatures, could be all our creator envisioned. But in order for God to limit that power in positive ways, that also means God does not intervene in every moment of our suffering. But if God does not intervene and mitigate suffering, does that mean God isn't merciful? How can God express mercy without abusing power?

Enter Jesus. Because God, from the beginning of creation, has chosen not to wield power, God instead enters into creation as Jesus. Human. God chooses to limit power once again and be human. Coming among us to walk with us, to feel with us, to suffer with us, to die like us.

"When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to

him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep." And while the Jews thought the weeping was out of love for Lazarus, John tells us that it is in response to the suffering of the people around him. Jesus weeps for us. Jesus weeps with us.

Dan Simundson, Old Testament scholar, wrote this lovely little book called *Where is God in my Suffering?* He says, "Our experiences leave us baffled. In the absence of relief from our suffering, we might be tempted to believe that God does not love us, that God is not moved by our plight. But any doubt about that should be removed by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. Here is God coming to us in weakness, like our own weakness. God's power is put aside. The crucifixion is allowed to continue. Those who plot the terrible deed are not struck dead. God does not intervene. God's power is withheld that we may know once and for all that the God who made the world is more interested in convincing us of how much we are loved than in demonstrating power. Too many people know that God is powerful, but they do not know how much God grieves over the hurts and sufferings of his people. On the cross, God humbled himself to be like us and bear our sorrow. God does not coerce us, but wants to show us that he is worthy of our trust and devotion."

Next week we will trade places with Jesus. As he walks with us in our suffering, we will walk with Jesus as he suffers. As he suffers betrayal. As he suffers abandonment by his beloved. As he suffers injustice. As he suffers public ridicule. As he suffers death.

And we recognize our own suffering in his suffering. And Jesus says to us, "I am the resurrection and the life. Yes, I will resurrect you on the last day, but I also come to you today in your suffering to raise you up and give you life. Life to live today. Right now. I am the resurrection and the life for you."

Amen