



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"A Song For Suffering" - Real Faith for Real People Series

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Good morning everyone. Before we dive into our scripture passage, I just have to say, "Happy Super Bowl Sunday!" Maybe that is a big deal to some of you and not so much to others.

I personally love sports. I love the commentary, the story lines, the drama. My wife calls sports, "Man drama and soap operas for guys."

I want to know is there anyone here today who has ever actually prayed for their team during a game? Anybody? I must say I have a couple of times and one specific time was during a Super Bowl. It was 2004, the Patriots were playing the Panthers, and even though I am not a fan of either team, I decided to adopt the Panthers.

I remember it so clearly. It was the fourth quarter; the Panthers had trailed all game and it seemed they could just never tie the game or take the lead. Things were getting desperate, so me and my best friend David decided to kneel on the floor, hold hands, and pray for a miraculous touchdown.

I kid you not; the very next play that happened after we said, "Amen" was an 85-yard touchdown pass...the longest in Super Bowl history! It was a miracle! Amazing! The only problem is I never actually prayed for the

Panthers to win. I just prayed they would score. And so the Patriots would end up winning the game anyway. Now *there's* a lesson on being specific with your prayer.

Even though this is not a serious example of prayer, isn't it interesting how situations and challenges that we can solve on our own strength rarely lead us to prayer? It is the things that are too big, that are out of our control, that bring us to our knees. And I would bet that nothing leads us into prayer with more desperation than suffering.

Suffering catches you completely off guard: a call from a doctor, a pink slip at work, the sudden loss of a loved one, the pain of broken trust and abandonment, and so on. We don't plan suffering into our life, and yet it seems to find us all.

Some of the greatest songs of all time were inspired by deep pain, depression and suffering—songs like "Remedy" by Adele; "I Would" by Justin Bieber; "Don't Speak" by No Doubt; "Unbreak My Heart" by Toni Braxton; and "Yesterday" by The Beatles connect with us all because they reflect the feelings and experiences we've had. They are songs for the suffering.

The topic of pain and suffering is

one that unites all of humanity.

And so our passage of scripture today is one that we all can relate to.

James is in the final chapter of his book. He is writing to the early Jewish Christian church who are under heavy persecution, being deported, tortured and killed for their faith in Jesus. And as James is wrapping up his final thoughts and encouragement he says this, (my own paraphrase):

"Dear brothers and sisters, be humble, patient and have courage for Jesus is coming soon to make all things right. When suffering finds you, be patient, don't try to fix it and demand answers. By suffering you are joining the human race and are in good company with many godly men and women who also have suffered. Job is a great example of someone who never gave up, and God was kind and merciful to him."

This passage of scripture is packed full of different amazing themes and we are going to begin by looking at the final verse, verse 11.

It says, "As you know we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance..."

Now for the sake of not assuming we all know about Job, let me share his story with you. You can find it in the Bible in the book named after him. He was a wealthy man, prosperous, with a good family, many children and lots of property. He was also a godly man, a man of integrity who stayed away from sin and feared God.

Then, one day, he lost everything. The Bible tells the story like this in Job chapter one verses 13-19:

One day when Job's sons and daughters were feasting at the oldest brother's house, a messenger arrived at Job's home with this news: the Sabeans raided us. They stole all the animals and killed all the farmhands. While he was still speaking, another messenger arrived with this news: "The fire of God has fallen from the sky and burned up your sheep and all the shepherds.

While he was still speaking, a third messenger arrived with this news: "Three bands of Chaldean raiders have stolen your camels and killed your servants. While he was still speaking, another messenger arrived with this news: "Your sons and daughters were feasting in their oldest brother's home. Suddenly, a powerful wind swept in from the wilderness and hit the house on all sides. The house collapsed, and all your children are dead.

Now that is a bad day, probably one of the worst I've ever heard of. Job loses everything—his children, his possessions...all gone.

Unfortunately for Job, things would get worse. The next day, Job was struck with a horrible disease of boils over his entire body, burning, bleeding, itching. The Bible describes

Job using shards of glass to scrape his wounds for relief. Then Job's wife comes and, being the supportive woman she was, tells Job to curse God and die already!

What horrible suffering Job had experienced.

At that point in the story three friends of Job arrive on the scene. At first his friends come and sit in silence, supporting their friend with their presence.

After a long time of sitting in silence, Job begins the dialogue by admitting out loud that he is very confused as to why he, a righteous man, is suffering. After hearing Job speak his mind, his friends make a bad mistake—they open their mouths. They try to answer Job's questions and join in to correct and debate with him and even scold him—*three* against one.

Here are some examples of the supportive and helpful things Job's friends say to him:

"How long will you talk like this, you sound like the blustering wind."

"Shouldn't someone answer this torrent of words? Is a person proved innocent just by a lot of talking?"

"Should I remain silent while you babble on? When you mock God, shouldn't someone make you ashamed?"

"A wise man wouldn't answer with such empty talk! You are nothing but a windbag."

And I will stop there (believe me, it gets worse!) Great friends! And if you add his wife to the team

with what she said earlier, it is *four* against one.

The story ends with God literally answering and speaking out loud to Job. God goes on to bless and restore to Job everything he lost times two, as well as gives him ten more children and many more years of life.

As I mentioned earlier, our main passage from James sums up the entire story of Job in one verse...that he persevered through his suffering and experienced the mercy and love of God in a new way.

James is telling his reader that suffering will come, if it already hasn't, just like it did for Job, the prophets of Israel, Jesus, and even James himself. He is writing to them out of his own experiences. I think it is easier to take instruction from people who are qualified and are following their own instruction, don't you?

The truth is, it is easier to trust people who have walked where we are walking. So, as I talk about suffering with you today, I think it is fitting for me to share some of my family's story with you from this past year.

I definitely wouldn't consider my life to be the same as Job's, thank God, but 2016 was the most challenging year full of pain and heartache that both my wife and I have ever experienced.

We have lived on Oahu for 18 months now. We made the decision to move here because we knew it was where God was taking us. There were so many doors opening and so much confirmation from those close to us.

Like Pastor Dan said last week, "More eyes, clearer vision," we know it was God's plan for our lives, no doubt.

What we did not see coming however was disease, illness, surgery countless ER visits and family estrangement. In 2016 we dealt with three surgeries, CDiff (a dangerous stomach bacteria), broken bones, a cyst growing to the size of a softball within the abdomen, the croup, arthritis, internal bleeding, insomnia, and many more. The worst part for me at least, was that the majority of that list was not something that my own body went through. Most of that list is what my wife and daughter went through.

The hardest time came last March during HIM Conference at the Convention Center. Our daughter woke up one morning covered in welts, hives, rashes and swelling. Over a span of eight days we would watch her little body struggle with painful swelling and high fever. To this day we do not know what caused it and we have been told that there is a chance that it may happen again.

The truth is we have and will all suffer in our lives. But did you know that God did not design for things to be this way? Death and suffering was not the original plan. When we suffer it is a product of the broken world we live in. Things like disease, devastation, war, abuse, broken hearts, and death are all a product of a world gone wrong due to sin.

It would be wonderful if Christians were exempt from the pain of suffering, but we are not. So if suffering is a sure thing, how should we respond to it?

I need to make a side note

before I begin. When grieving loss and suffering there are five completely normal steps in processing such things. They are shock, denial, anger, bargaining, and acceptance. This process is so important and should not be judged or condemned. It is normal. My family has, and is, working through these very same steps.

We see Job journeying through all five of these stages in his story. But although Job is crushed and suffering, there is a very powerful point of his story where he writes his own song for suffering. It is found in the first chapter of Job after he has just found out about his ten dead children.

The Bible says this: **20** *Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped.*

21 *He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD."*

So as we try to learn from Job, I want to look at three steps in writing our own song for suffering. Song writing is exciting and challenging and there are a lot of different elements to it.

But today I will just focus on three of them with you: **Illumination, Expedition, and Expectation**

1. Illumination - When writing a song, you are putting a spotlight on the reality of the problem or suffering. To do so, you must look at the reality of pain for what it is.

James does not ignore the fact that there is major suffering going on

in the world. He doesn't say, "What suffering?! No problems or worries here." He calls out exactly what his brothers and sisters are going through and then uses examples of biblical figures, such as Job, to compare their own suffering. Wow! Using Job as the comparison, you know their suffering had to have been great.

And like James, honesty about the suffering inside our own heart and in our surrounding world is painful, but how can we ever find strength and help if we don't look at the state of our heart and our world?

Søren Kierkegaard famous Christian theologian and philosopher said, "There are two ways to be fooled. One is to believe what isn't true; the other is to refuse to believe what is true."

Now when you read the story of Job, you will see he is excellent at vocalizing his actual state of being and very honest about his doubts and questions.

But Job's illumination on his suffering is so important because it not only gives him freedom to be honest, but it also begins the discussion with God.

Job says things like, "And even if I summoned him and he responded, I'm not sure he would listen to me. For he attacks me with a storm and repeatedly wounds me without cause. He will not let me catch my breath, but fills me instead with bitter sorrows".

Not only is he brutally honest about his pain, but he is honest that in his heart he is not sure God cares at all.

God is also very good at illumination. In His conversation with Job at the end of the story, God reveals to Job that deep within his heart he has thought to have figured God out; deep within his heart he may have some pride and needs a tune up in what righteousness looks like. The pain of suffering and Job's honest communication with God revealed things about Job that needed to change.

So our first step is Illumination, which leads to our second step.

2. Expedition – Music, like books, takes us on journeys full of challenges and surprises.

In verse nine of our passage in James it tells us to have courage and to not give up, even in the face of suffering. Our expedition or journey through suffering will be day-by-day, hour-by-hour, minute-by-minute, which of course is not simple at all. But what makes our expedition and endurance even harder is when we try to do it alone. God has given us a great gift: each other.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 says this: *"Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up."*

Looking back, I remember the second day of my daughter's illness last March. We had been in the ER the day before and they sent us home hoping things would improve. The next morning we awoke to greater horror than we had imagined. Gianna's lips looked like she had received botox; they swelled up under her nose. Her eyes were swollen halfway shut and she had

bumps of hives all over her head. Her chest and stomach looked like a catcher's guard in baseball with roll after roll of welts stretching across her mid section. Her hands and feet were so swollen she would take one step and begin crying and shuffling her weight because the pain was too much to stand.

I had to leave the room and cry when I saw her because we didn't want to startle her. When we rushed her in to ER again that morning, the last thing I would have wanted to hear is things like, "Cheer up dad. God cares for her more than you do." "Well, at least her immunity is getting built up." "She'll live." "God makes all things work together for good."

It wouldn't have mattered if every word out of your mouth was true and right...it would not have helped anything. But I can tell you what I do remember and will always remember about that day.

Tim Shaw coming to the ER with orange juice and some breakfast bars for Val and I and him sitting with us, whispering prayers of mercy for our daughter and then being silent for hours.

I remember Marianna Meachen bringing a Minnie Mouse doll to Gia's hospital room. She has that doll by her bed to this day.

I remember Pastor Dan bringing Starbucks and sitting in the room while Val and I bawled out the doctor for some bad care they gave our daughter.

You will never be more thankful for loving, caring friends as when you are suffering. Especially the ones who don't need to solve your

problems, or have something to say, but just sit with you and let you know you are not alone.

Building up trusting relationships is like dating. You keep trying until you find the right fit. Look for people who encourage you and show you love. And run fast from those who take from you even in your suffering, like job's friends.

One great resource our church has is Rooted. It is a new ministry made up of many small groups that are going through some simple, but very valuable, studies in different Christian topics. This week's topic is guess what? Suffering. If you are not going through Rooted currently, I strongly suggest you make plans to take part in the next cycle later this year!

However you decide to test the water of trust and friendship with others, don't give up or isolate if you don't find the right fit right away. Keep praying and looking for the people God has prepared to be a support to you.

If we are willing to travel through our suffering, each step, each new relationship built, each new day builds more expectation for a greater life ahead.

And that is the final step: **3. Expectation** – This is what gives hope to a song, even if all the questions were not answered and the pain is still there, the hope that a better day is coming is what gives power to the music.

James reminds us that Christ is coming again and that our hope is based in the life to come, in heaven with Christ forever.

If God were to take away our present suffering, which He does do through healings and all kinds of miraculous ways, the truth is that one day the suffering will return, in the same way or in a totally new way, because that is the nature of our broken world. Suffering and death will always be around in this life.

So what do we hope in? Revelation 20 says, *“Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the former things have passed away.”*

That is our hope! There is coming a day when the flames of suffering and death will be extinguished by God’s powerful grace and we will live forever in heaven.

But the truth is, we also have hope in the present. For the God we serve is so loving and gracious, that He is with us and supports us through the struggles of life. He doesn’t have to, eternal life in heaven with Him is the greatest gift, but just like James says in our scripture today, God is compassionate and merciful.

Isaiah chapter 40 says this:
*How can you say the Lord does not see your troubles?
How can you say God ignores your rights?
Have you never heard? Have you never understood?
The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of all the earth.
He never grows weak or weary.
No one can measure the depths of his understanding. He gives power to the weak and strength to the powerless.*

Even youths will become weak and tired, and young men will fall in exhaustion. But those who trust in the Lord will find new strength.

They will soar high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint.

If we put your hope in this God, described in this powerful scripture, we will not be disappointed. His great understanding will illuminate our lives. His power will resource our expedition. And if we look with great expectation to Him, we will find strength that is renewed every day.

I love music. For my family, music is part of our everyday life. Sometimes we have little dance parties with Gianna before bed. Right now Gianna’s favorite song is “How Far It Goes” from the movie, Moana. As I look back over this past year, in times of challenges, some of our favorite worship songs have given us a lot of peace and they will forever be remembered as songs for our suffering.

And there is a famous story that took place in 1873, regarding a song for suffering. A father said goodbye to his wife and four daughters as they sailed through the Atlantic Ocean headed for England. At a point in their journey, there was a boat wreck, leaving only his wife alive. All four of their daughters were killed.

A little while after this horrific event, the father traveled the same boat journey through the Atlantic Ocean to meet his wife in England.

And on that boat trip that literally passed over the site of that horrific incident, the father, Horatio Spafford, wrote this song:

*When peace like a river
attendeth my way
When sorrows like sea billows
roll
Whatever my lot Thou has
taught me to say
It is well, it is well with my soul*

I don’t know what phase of your song for suffering you are in. Maybe we are in denial or anger. Maybe we have accepted our challenges but don’t know what to do next. Maybe we are in the journey and are learning to succeed and fail and to be okay with that. And maybe some of you are in the step of expectation and are seeing first hand that God is very much with you.

No matter where we are at in the journey, God is the perfect example of patience and endurance, for He doesn’t turn his back on us when we fail, when we doubt, even when we are the cause of our suffering. He never gives up on us. His love will never fail us. He offers us His free gift of grace today.

And this God I am speaking of, will not disappoint you for as we see in Job, He gives beauty for ashes and songs for suffering.

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Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: fpchkoolau@gmail.com