

There's an immense amount of suffering in this world.

And at seminary they can teach you a lot, and this concept is certainly one thing that is brought up, but nothing in my four years really prepared me for the reality of how pervasive suffering is in this world.

As I look out from up here, as I see you sitting in the pews and imagine you who could be on the other side of the camera, the idea of some people suffering somewhere evaporates like a puff of smoke. Every person before me knows suffering.

Every person that you nodded at across the sanctuary, every person that you drove past on the way to get here, every person in every room that you're ever in, and that includes even when you're sitting in your kitchen, drinking your coffee alone, they've all suffered, they're likely currently suffering in some way, and they will certainly suffer again in the days to come.

It might be as simple as being tired or having an ache in the foot or the back. It might be feeling abandoned by loved ones who left them in the lurch. It might be a disease that the doctors just can't get a grasp on. It might be that you're fleeing your home because your country is being invaded. Some seem to have all the suffering every day and others have it relatively light, but you just can't escape it.

And you know what game we like to play with it all? We like to see suffering, ours and others, and ask "God, what does it mean?" It's what the gossips around Christ were asking, even though they didn't have the courage to outright say it.

Did they deserve it? Is it something bad they did behind closed doors that God is now causing this suffering?

In our day and age, maybe because the idea of God existing at all has become less popular in the public conversation, but now more than ever we're more comfortable with the idea of senseless suffering, suffering without cause or reason. Lightning strikes where it will, disease might enter the scene, conflict can just arise between two people that happened to eat a different breakfast than normal. Without the definitive belief in God, people don't have someone to interrogate when things go wrong. They don't have an ultimate cause possibly behind every bad thing to blame.

And in some ways I don't think this is horrible. Maybe just one way, actually. I think it's good that we recognize that the creation we live in is broken. Because of sin, things just go wrong. Tsunami's are the world's way of groaning in childbirth, waiting for the return of Christ. Cancer and dementia don't need to have a sin that they are punishing; they simply arise in bodies that are dying, bodies just like yours and mine.

We don't need to have a sin that is being punished to explain why I was attacked by wolves on a walk. It can simply be that it happened (it didn't happen).

But back in the time of Jesus, and underneath our "new-found-logic" everyone wants there to be a reason.

There are times when a reason is undeniable. When a drunk driver finds himself locked behind bars, alone because of the evil he has committed, the tragedy he caused, God is bringing about some temporal justice for sin done. When a spouse cheats and ruins a marriage and can no longer enjoy the company of that family, in fact all relationships seem strange, that's a natural consequence of sin. When more than 20000 Israelites fall dead in their wanderings in the wilderness, Paul assures us that it is because of their sin; their unfaithfulness, their ingratitude, their sexual immorality caused them to die as they meandered rather than entering the promised land.

Jesus doesn't allow this answer in the current events discussed in our Gospel reading today. He doesn't reveal the will of God to explain that the seemingly pious Jews, faithfully offering sacrifices to God to receive His mercy and grace, that brutal Pontius Pilate slaughtered them alongside their lambs because they were secretly in a sex cult or because they mistreated their wives and children. And those passing by a tower that happened to crumble on top of them, Jesus doesn't reveal that God caused them to be in that place because they all were worshipping other gods in their closet shrines at home.

Jesus doesn't confirm any grand sins, neither does He deny that they were being punished for sins. He doesn't even acknowledge that they were just random events. He refuses to let anyone in the conversation look at the suffering of others and unpack the will of God for the victims. No, He makes sure that everything they observe causes them to reflect on their own ways.

“Unless you repent, you will likewise perish.”

Do we think our sins are actually this grave? Do you believe what you said earlier “we deserve temporal and eternal punishment” for your thoughts, and words, and deeds?

When we play the “did they deserve it” game, there’s part of us hoping to take note so we can avoid the terrible fate; the other part of us wants proof that we’re just not as bad as them. We think our lives haven’t spun out of control yet because we haven’t tried God’s patience as much as them. Yes, we sin, we’re sinners, but not as much as them.

“But I tell you, unless you repent, you will likewise perish.”

The fact that you have sunny days and enjoy laughter and eat good food, this is not because you’ve deserved it. And the fact that we haven’t been humiliated before the world, punished for our sins of thought, and word, and deed is purely the mercy of God. He has never once desired the death of the wicked, and all are wicked and truly deserve nothing but suffering and death, but to each of us, in our own wickedness He has yearned that we would turn and live. So He has been long-suffering, patient beyond imagination, covering up our sin, protecting us from its consequences, protecting the world around us from so much of our selfishness, that He may work on us to turn towards Him and live.

Jesus sounds a lot like the hopeful vinedresser in His parable.

A man owned a fig tree and he has patiently waited for the tree to take root and mature, to build up the strength and the systems to at last bear juicy, life-giving fruit. He’s not brash. He’s given the tree more than enough time, seven years if you go by the Leviticus laws about planting fruit trees, and yes, that’s actually in the book of Leviticus, yet the tree seems to be a dud. It seems to be stubbornly set on putting out useless leaves rather than any of the intended fruit. It’s wasting the nutrients in the soil, it’s a waste of space, taking up the spot of a potential fruit-bearing tree, and it’s just become a headache and disappointment to the one who put his money into tending it all this time. Tear it out, chop it up, and replace it.

“Wait” or “forgive” is the request of the vinedresser. The one who has been patiently and tirelessly toiling with the whole field, who has been eagerly anticipating buds each season and hoping that the fruitless trees will at last begin producing, he asks the owner for at least

another season. He is an advocate for the helpless, voiceless tree, interceding for that which, according to a just system, would rightly be discarded.

We are the fig trees, called to bear good fruit. Paul calls them the fruit of the Spirit; in the parable what we're supposed to produce clearly should bring sustenance to those around us. You ought to be bearing the fruits of love and righteousness in the world around you, Jesus says. But once again, the verdict is not pleasant.

Just as we all ought to perish in tragedy because of the sins we commit, the evil we participate in, we likewise ought to be ripped out of the vineyard, discarded from God's garden because of our lack of love—we are so focussed on ourselves that we neglect to serve those around us.

But there is one that looks us in the eyes and calls us to repentance, not only for the hurt we cause but also for the absent fruit in our lives. The vinedresser refuses to abandon us to our corruption deserving of destruction but insists on tending to our brokenness instead.

And this is the mercy that we desperately need because a tree that finds itself producing only foliage can't do much for itself. It's only going to carry on as it knows, putting out new twigs and branches, fruitless still. Unless it is pruned back, unless the diseased bit is cut away, unless it gets its soil aerated and replenished with the nutrients that it's clearly lacking, unless help comes from outside, then its fruitless future is essentially set. It might as well be kindling.

But Christ knows precisely what you need to grow life and goodness into you anew.

First of all, He perished, He was torn out and cast away just like you deserve to be. That was accomplished on Calvary so that there would be space and time for Christ to work on you, to make you just like Himself, to cause you to repent and trust in Him.

And as He let go of His life, not clinging to it but instead willing to sacrifice it, He gives it to you. He gives you His patience, that which He displayed to sinners all around, to those who mocked Him and pierced His hands, those who cried out "crucify Him" and caused His last breath. That patience is now yours, given to you that it may bear fruit in your marriage, in your workplace, in your life. And His peace, which persisted through Gethsemane and even abandonment on the cross, that peace is placed around your roots, put into your hands and mouth even, that you may bear peace when life tries to draw anger and frustration and

resentment out of you. Kindness and generosity, those traits that He showed to the thankless masses, this is placed in your ears and your heart as you heard His absolution and you hear His blessing again and again.

He doesn't demand that you stir these fruits up in you to prove your worth. He gives them to you, freely and fully, that you may reflect them, sharing them just as you've been given them.

So if I'm in such good hands, and the vinedresser is doing such faithful work on me, why does the suffering go on? What am I to make of the pain that I endure and the tragedy that crosses my newsfeed?

Suffering, whether the direct consequence of sin or a senseless result of sin in the world, it is a fact of life until Christ returns and we dwell on the new earth where sin hasn't corrupted one thing. And until then, suffering demands that we wake up. Rarely will we know God's reason behind the loss we feel and the horrors we see, but each occasion of it is a time to understand the gravity of sin. For even the worst suffering that we may observe, even the death sentence to a cruel and heartless mass murderer, that is less suffering than each of us deserve.

So whether we're in shock at wars on the other side of the earth or we are crying over the diagnosis of our parents or ourselves, all of it ought to shake us up, realizing that we have earned so much worse, and may that drive us anew to Christ.

And in this we turn from the sins we commit, the gossip, the lust, the sloth, the jealousy, the resentments towards our parents, the slandering against our governments, the apathy to God's Word and gathering as His people. We turn from these because we realize that they aren't harmless little sins. And we beg Christ to place His life into our roots, into our mouths, into our hearts, that we would no longer neglect to bear fruit but would live our days in Him.

And in all of this, as the world continues on, we are constantly repenting, drawn back to Christ, that we would make it through the wilderness and enter the Promised Land with all His saints.

Lord, have mercy on us, and carry us sinners to that end.

Amen.