

**Shake It Off and Step Up**  
Psalm 30, 2 Kings 5.1-14

FUPC  
July 10, 2016

We live in a wired world. For those of us who use smart phones, we are connected instantaneously to events around the world as they happen – no matter what the time zone. And so this week, we saw videos of two men who lost their lives almost within minutes of when they were shot. We saw the rage of protesters gathering in different cities around our country... and then learned almost as it happened that someone had shot and killed 5 police officers and wounded others. Between Twitter, Facebook, and the instant news feeds that flow into our phones, we became part of the event almost as it was happening.

Every week it's the same. We live in a dangerous world. Who knows but that one day, we'll end up by accident in the wrong place at the wrong time... and another bullet will have found its mark, or a bomb will blow us to heaven, even if we are innocent bystanders.

And then there are the floods that destroyed homes and property and claimed more innocent lives. And the fires that reduced lifetimes of photos, memories and precious keepsakes to ashes in minutes. Or the child who is left in the car suffocating to death in the heat. Or the young girls who are trapped in the basement of a deranged perpetrator, chained to the rafters and with no hope of escape. Do we grow numb with a kind of hopeless resignation when the technology we live by drags us into these events every single day? Does the predictable repetition lead to a kind of "compassion fatigue?"

Do we still ask the "Why" questions? Why do we suffer? Why do good people suffer? Why do innocent people suffer? It's the question that comes most quickly when we find ourselves or someone we love facing unexpected pain, be it emotional, physical or relational pain. And we hurt on behalf of the Mothers who've watched their sons die because of a broken tail light or the fathers who are supposed to protect their daughters from danger, reduced to helpless anger when they learn of their abuse. And our hearts are heavy with grief from the senseless loss of life through violence or the deaths that come from natural disasters beyond our control. Moms and Dads, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, Uncles, Aunts, cousins and wide circles of friends and colleagues all mourn today because their loved one was taken from their lives. And we don't know why!!

Part of what it means to be human is that we are able to ask "Why?" Maybe we believe that if we can find the answer, it will help us to accept and understand what's happening that we find to be so unwelcome. Maybe knowing the answer will let us bear the pain more courageously. Victor Frankl, who also died this past week, was a psychotherapist who was a captive in the Nazi prison camps. He wrote that a person can endure any kind of suffering if they can find meaning in it. He observed that those who could find some meaning in the death camp experience were the ones who bore their pain most courageously.

When someone suffers who has inflicted harm on others, we tend to see their suffering as justice being served...the drunk driver deserves to have his/her license taken away, or to serve time in jail, the thief deserves to spend time in prison. The murderer deserves to be locked up for the rest of his life, or maybe even to pay with his life with a death sentence. The student who cheats in an attempt to ace the final exam deserves an F for taking the easy way out, and using the hard work and knowledge of others

But what about the child whose mother filled her body with illegal drugs during her pregnancy resulting in a brain damaged son or daughter? What about a teen-ager who will never see their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday because of a hit and run driver who was drunk;

What about the single mom who works hard at two jobs with no child support, comes home to cook, clean, do laundry, hug her kids, and help them with their homework, but goes to work one day and learns that her job no longer exists.

And just as puzzling as this question is the “Why” question that comes when someone does wrong... and instead of suffering, they prosper! The cheat who gets away with it, the thief who is released on a legal technicality, the politician who keeps getting re-elected even though he/she abuses their power.

These are fairly substantial theological questions. And they are, as far as I can tell, unanswerable. The answer to most every “Why” question is shrouded in mystery. And so we make giant efforts to understand by speculating about the answer:

Did I screw up and am I being punished?  
 Is God really malevolent instead of gracious?  
 Is God toying with me?  
 What larger purpose lies behind this pain?  
 Am I supposed to be learning something?  
 Has God abandoned me?  
 Is God not really as powerful as I had believed?  
 If God is all-powerful then why doesn't God do something about these horrible tragedies?

I cannot give you your answers. We all have to find our own answers. For some of us, the answers will come quickly, clearly. For others of us, we may never find the answer and simply have to endure whatever pain has come into our lives without understanding its meaning.

There is an old folk tale about a servant whose job it was to draw water from the river everyday and transport it to his master's house. He did this by using two large pots which hung from each end of a long pole that he carried across his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it. At the end of the long walk from the river to the master's house, the cracked pot arrived only half full. The other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water.

For two years the servant delivered each day only one and a half pots full of water to his master's house. The perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments, but the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection and depressed over accomplishing only half of what it had been made to do.

After two years of what it perceived to be bitter failure, the cracked pot spoke to the servant one day by the river. “I am ashamed of myself and I want to apologize to you.” “What are you ashamed of?” asked the servant. “For these past two years I have been able to deliver only half my load because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way to your master's house. Because of my flaws, you don't get full value from your hard work of carrying the water.”

The servant replied, “As we return to the master's house, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path.” As they went up the hill, the cracked pot noticed the beautiful wild flowers on the side of the path. When they reached the house, the servant said to the pot, “Did you notice the flowers grew only on your side of the path and not on the other pot's side? That's because I have always known about your flaw, and I took advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path and every day while we walk back from the stream, you've watered them. For two years, I have been able to pick beautiful flowers to decorate my master's table.”

Have you ever considered the possibility that God may be growing a bed of flowers from the tears of your pain? Out of the mystery of brokenness, there sometimes comes a deeper mystery of new life. Divine grace sometimes transforms failure into fresh beginnings. The imperfections, the cracks, the fragile infirmities of body, soul and spirit placed within the loving hands of our compassionate God may become a means of blessing, full of transcendent mystery.

Some of the most beautiful people I know are the ones with the most wrinkles in their faces, from the pain they've lived with and from the hardships they've endured. Our sufferings can make us bitter or they can make us better. It depends on what they mean to us and what we do with them.

The Psalmist writes, ***“I will exalt you, O Lord, for you lifted me out of the depths and did not let my enemies gloat over me. O Lord, you brought me up from the grave; you spared me from going down into the pit.” (30.1-3)***

Three words describe the poet's state of mind... he found himself in the “depths”; in a “grave” and trapped in a “pit”. Isn't this where we find ourselves sometimes? I can hear this man's heart because I know what he's talking about from personal experience. Have you ever been there? I know you have. Life grows dark with threats, causing us to be afraid, to lose hope. From personal failure, to physical illness, from spiritual doubts to broken friendships...from rejection and disrespect to feelings of failure, it can feel like we're living on the underside of life and its hard to feel any hope that it will ever be any different. Living in the “depths”... in the “pits”...we lose perspective and we grow overwhelmed with our own helplessness. It's easy to grow discouraged and depressed. We may be living, breathing, eating, sentient beings, but there can be a kind of living death that makes us move through our days with all the joy of life sucked right out of us.

But the poet, describing his state of heart and mind, says that it was while he was in those deep, dark places, that he experienced the deliverance of God. “You lifted me out of the depths...” “You brought me up from the grave...” “You spared me from going down into the pit...”

Yes, there is weeping, says the Poet. Pain is real... tears come. Especially at night when life grows quiet, all the distractions are silenced and we are left alone with our thoughts and fears. We long for the morning, the breaking of day when the sun's light will awaken us... because “rejoicing comes in the morning.”

Listen to the poet's heart. He found healing once. He was restored, made whole. He said to himself, “How foolish of me to be afraid. I am secure. I will never allow myself to be so shaken by anything again.” And yet, there was a time when trouble re-appeared, his world began to break into pieces, and he wondered where God was. He couldn't see God, hear God, touch God, or taste God. God had grown silent, as though he was hiding his face. And the poet lost heart once again. He cried out to God in his utter devastation of spirit, cried out for healing and wholeness. Cried out for mercy and forgiveness.

The answer came back... “You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my garments of death and clothed me with joy. Lord, may my heart always sing to you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever.”

Can you see the image here? This is a Psalm for people who are struggling to come to terms with some failure, some fear, some hurt, some brokenness in their life. When we cry out to God, we will be heard. There is no doubt that help will come. We may not get exactly what we asked for in our

prayers. In fact, we may get the opposite of what we ask for. But the kicker is that God never abandons us in the deepest, darkest places of our journey.

There is a story about an old dog that fell into a farmer's well. After assessing the situation, the farmer sympathized with the dog but decided that neither the dog nor the well were worth the trouble of saving. Instead he planned to bury the old dog in the well and put him out of his misery.

When the farmer began shoveling in the dirt, initially the old dog was hysterical. But as the farmer continued shoveling and the dirt hit his back, a thought struck him. It dawned on the dog that every time a shovel load of dirt landed on his back he should shake it off and step up. This is what the dog did, blow after blow, "Shake it off and step up, shake it off and step up, shake it off and step up." He kept repeating it to re-assure himself.

No matter how painful the blows or how distressing the situation seemed, the old dog fought panic and just kept shaking it off and stepping up. It wasn't long before the dog, battered and exhausted, stepped triumphantly over the wall of that well. What seemed as though it would bury him actually benefited him – all because of the way he handled his adversity.

Shake it off. That means mastering the skill of letting it go. When we hold on to our pain, we can replay our feelings of self-pity and hurt anytime we want. Shaking it off means not handing our happiness over to what anyone else says or doesn't say, does or doesn't do. If we can't learn to shake it off, we become captives to our hurt, captives to our past, captives to our anger, captives to all the dirt that falls into our lives that we hate and wish weren't there. Stepping up means opening ourselves to the mystery of God's healing grace. Extending forgiveness as a way to release ourselves. Becoming stronger, more wise, more grounded, more gracious and loving, more patient, more compassionate because of the adversity. Stepping up is important if we're going to avoid being buried by our troubles. Shaking it off is one thing. Stepping up is another.... Its where the healing and deepening comes from.

If we face our problems and respond to them positively, refusing to give in to panic, bitterness, or self-pity, the adversities that come along to bury us usually have within them the potential to bless us! It may take a night or many nights of crying, but the promise is that there will one day be a morning that comes when joy will rule our hearts.

Guided Imagery...

Are you carrying some kind of pain in your life today? What does it feel like? Where are you carrying it? What color is it? How heavy is it? Does it have a texture... is it rough, smooth? Get a mental image of this hurt in your life. Have you been carrying it around for a long time? For a long distance? Imagine yourself in a dark cave. This cave represents all that you fear, all that robs you of peace, all that keeps you from being joyful and free. Notice that there is a light coming from somewhere in the darkness. Walk toward that light... it is God coming to sit with you in the dark. Where God is, Light is. Let God sit with you in your dark place. Let God be your companion in this difficult passage. In another Psalm, the poet writes, "I sought the Lord and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears." It couldn't be more clear than that. It's the gift that awaits you today. It's one of the reasons why you are here today, whether you know it or not. God wants to give you the gift of His presence and power, always, everywhere and for any reason. This is the good news. This is the Word of God. Amen.

*Strong God, compassionate and reliable through all our wanderings, we sit before you wondering how, in this vast universe, populated by billions of stars we're aware of and untold billions we are not aware of, how we could possibly matter to you. And yet, we believe we do. Yes, we believe that the small details, and not so small details of our lives, are somehow fitting together for a purpose that, at the moment, seems rather mysterious. Even as our "why" questions remain unanswered, Let us know beyond doubt that the answer to the question... How shall we make it through this dark passage... is never in doubt. You promise us your presence, your peace, your poise, and your power. We need all these things in our lives. Thank you, God, greater than our wildest imaginings... for the gifts of body, soul and spirit that you give us every day. Amen.*