

Excuse me while I dig around to the back of my pocket to turn this thing on. Oh, we're on already? Oh, good job. I didn't need to awkwardly dig around on the back of my pants. Guys, what a great morning so far.

Had a baptism. There's some fresh persimmon pudding back there at the coffee bar. I am ready just to say amen and go home. It's been a good day, and I'm so proud of you guys. You keep showing up.

We've had a sermon on politics. I'd never want to do that again in the next twelve years. We've had a sermon on sex and identity. That was a rough one for me personally. I told Sean, I said, listen, I'm ready to just preach on hell and eternal damnation.

Something easy. Something easy. All right, today the topic is another hard one, because I know it affects all of us in the room. I got a chance to go back over. I bought a house recently.

I've talked about this old house. Got a chance to go back and look at the listing photos. Have you ever done this to your house, see what it looked like when you decided to buy it and you tried to remind yourself, now, why did I buy this house? Oh, because the listing photos looked so nice. I look back in mine and everything's tidy and clean.

The carpets are swept, the beds are made, the furniture is polished, the windows are sparkling. And if you visited my house this morning, you would not see listing worthy photos right now. It is rough. Why is that? Because people live there.

I'm a slob. It's just what? Look, I've got coffee all over the front of my shirt. This is the picture of my house right now. People live there and things get out of control.

Anyone identify with that? Right there. New parents discover this really early. When it's just two of you. You develop this little place where everything is in its place and has a spot and life is organized and tidy.

And then you have the first child and you think, how hard can this be? Within a week and a half, you realize we've lost control. We've absolutely lost. Can I get a name in on that? When we think about the disorder and chaos in the world and the suffering it can cause, it's easy to say, well, if God is our father, then surely there should be some sense of control here.

But as new parents, we know that there is a big difference between being in control and being in charge. Being in charge is one thing. Being in control is another thing altogether. When you have toddlers suffering and the problem of pain, as C. S.

Lewis described it, is an issue that can often cause us to question who's in charge and who's in control. I know this past week I had that question. Maybe you did, too, but as we open God's word, I hope that we'll get a perspective that will bring some hope to what can be hopeless situations and bring some answers into what can be. A lot of questions for you this morning, so let's pray.

Father, in the midst of just a blessed morning with Persimmon pudding and a baptism, we are aware that there is sadness and suffering all around us. Many of us in this room are just dealing with it ourselves. So, Jesus, we pray that as we speak your name over this place, that you meet us here in Jesus name. Amen. I think Alan opened with this.

I was out there welcoming people, so I don't really know what happened, but I think most of us do. Just a horrible situation. Horrible situation. In the midst of the Persimmon festival, I talked to Crystal. Shetler and she know we were just having a great time.

And then we got that news and it's like a cloud, a dark cloud settled over our community. And of course, there's always the questions, could we have done something to prevent this tragedy? I think there's a tendency among us living in a very blessed and relatively safe and trauma free part of the world to think somehow that culture is getting really worse when things like this happen. But I remembered The Christmas Story. You know the one I'm talking about, the one with Mary and Joseph and the sweet little baby Jesus in the manger and the peaceful animals around.

Not that one. I'm talking about the other one. Because, you see, whenever there's people, there's this opportunity for chaos and heartache. And even with Jesus, there's this potential. The story of Jesus' birth is often portrayed on Christmas cards and in songs as the silent and holy night.

We know that song. And the tender couple and the angels and the friends of the family and the wise men and the shepherds and the sweet little lambs. But if you know the story well, you know that there's a very dark side to this story. You see, the wise men who had come to the manger, the place where Jesus was staying by way of Jerusalem, and a stop at the palace to get directions from King Herod in a dream, realized that what the king really wanted to do was kill this potential threat to his own throne and power. And so after they had worshiped the baby Jesus, they snuck out and went home.

By another way, when King Herod hears about this, he is angry. And when we're angry, we do stupid stuff, don't we? And he feels threatened, he feels angry and he well, let's just read it. Matthew, chapter two, verses 16. Starting in verse 16.

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. And then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled. A voice is heard in Rama weeping and great mourning. Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they are no more. And if you've ever lost a child or someone you love deeply, you know what they are screaming, don't you?

They're screaming, God, if you are real. God, if you are good, god, if you are loving, then why did you allow this to happen?

I've sat with Susan and Cheryl and the Fish family over the last couple of years and a host of others as they've wept and asked that same question god, if you're all powerful, then how is this part of your plan? If you are sovereign, if your excellence and goodness and beauty transcend human understanding, as we talked about last week, if you are moral perfection, if you are behind all that's good and excellent in human relationships, then how does this kind of stuff exist in the same space that you are supposed to be in charge of?

And so we do stupid stuff, don't we? When we're feeling helpless, we say silly things. We say things like god is in control and it's all part of his plan. Ever say that? I have man.

I've said that in one. John one five scriptures make it clear god is light and in Him there is no darkness at all. God is light, in him there is no darkness at all. John four eight. John says this god is love.

Jesus says this in Matthew five. Your Heavenly Father is perfect. And so light and love and perfection I don't know. I can't reconcile that with a divine plan that includes rape and murder and injustice and mental illness. I can't do that.

Can we just all agree that a mother murdering her two children is not part of God's divine plan? Amen.

But this is the hard part. And this is the part where we go back to this is the verse that we have painted on our walls and we've got signs hanging in our kitchen. And we say this to ourselves when we don't get the promotion or we lose out on the bidding war for the house we want, we say this Romans 8:28 we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him and who have been called according to his purpose. But in situations like this, we understand that to quote this verse in a flippant or casual way can actually blaspheme God and repel people who he is trying to draw to Himself. And so we must be very careful when we talk about this verse and what it means.

So let's gently remind ourselves, especially those of us who are

dealing with personal suffering or are feeling the suffering of others very deeply this morning, how this works. And let's remind ourselves of the thing we've been talking about all through this series. The world is broken. We are broken and people around us are broken. We are not as God intended it to be.

Amen. And yet we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength as well as we can. We are to love God and Jesus says we are to love our neighbor as ourselves as well as we can. We are to love our neighbor. And yet when it comes to loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, our heart, soul, mind and strength are broken.

We're to love our neighbor as ourselves and yet we hate and abuse ourselves. We destroy ourselves. And so how are we to love our neighbors? They are actually in imminent danger. You should actually warn your neighbors that they're living next to someone who is probably a danger and a threat to them.

What are we to do? Like Toddlers, we are out of control at times and maybe whatever control we once were able to maintain, I just feel like we're depleted. We're sort of out of it. We don't have any left to give. And so in these moments, we naturally turn to the one who is in charge and he reminds us of this.

I work through what things, all things. All things. Nothing is beyond my sight. Nothing derails my intent to bring about good to those who will love and trust me. And for those the scriptures say who will freely love and freely trust me, I can redeem the darkest and most senseless parts of your life.

We talked about this last week. He brings beauty out of ashes. Anyone experienced that in their life. Amen. He does this.

But in the meantime, the suffering that we experience in this world reminds us that we live far from the perfect will of God. Yes, far. In Genesis, God surrendered control of his creation to Adam and Eve. He said, I'm giving this to you. You're to tend the garden.

You're to make it beautiful. And God would come down in the cool of the evening and talk to Adam and Eve about what they had done and their plans and what they were going to spend some investment in. And oh, we're planning on doing this over here. We're going to do this beautiful water feature over here. We're going to make a walkway over here.

And God says, that's beautiful. I love what you're doing with this place that I gave you. He asked him to not do one thing and yet they did. He said, don't do that. You have free will, but please don't do that.

And they did. And their free act of disobedience cut a gash in God's perfect intention for the world. And perfect light and perfect love was replaced with darkness and destruction. And now creation groans. The scripture says and hurting people scream and wail that this is not how it should be.

C S Lewis said this. He says, Every man knows that something is wrong when he is being hurt. We know this. We know that there is a moral perfection that is not being met when we are hurting. Last week's sermon, we touched on divorce, by the way, 20 conversations after Sunday's sermon on Divorce.

Any of you guys thought about that conversation? Have you ever processed through it? So here's the deal that deserves another sermon on its own. We'll get to it somewhere. In the meantime, stay married.

Please don't get divorced. Divorce in Jesus day was in many ways different from divorce in today's culture, but it still left innocent people devastated with their lives and their reputations and ruins suffering. And in the suffering, we are reminded that we live in a broken system that is far from God's perfect will and intent. So when we realize that we are far from God's perfect will and intent, it should send us running to God, shouldn't it? But very often, it sends us in the opposite direction.

For those of us who love God and are believing in his promise to work good out of everything, even horrible things, God can redeem and bring beauty out of that in a way that only he can imagine. First of all, we can't imagine. So don't try to imagine how God's going to do it, but only he can do it. But for those who refuse that and who don't want to turn to God, things just seem to fall apart more and more and more in their lives. I hate to see that.

But the tragedy of last week confirmed for people who are running from God. Things like the mother and little babies seem to confirm that. See, if God was really in control, stuff like this wouldn't happen. If there really was a God, then this stuff wouldn't take place. And they step even further from the only one who can heal them and bring them back to a place of wholeness and joy.

And then seeing someone else suffer can be worse than your own suffering. Have you ever experienced that? Parents, I think, feel this for their kids when they see their kids suffer. The kids managing the parents are devastated by this stuff. I think of Job's wife.

Job's wife, who watched her husband suffer all of that suffered right along with him. And Job's wife is the one who said, just curse God, give up on God, write God off entirely and move on with your life. Because at least then we can say to ourselves that life is meaningless

and give up trying to make sense of the horrible stuff that happens in life. And if that's you this morning, I'm so glad you're here, because I want you to just pause in your walking away from God for just a moment. Just sit here and consider again Jesus.

Jesus came with a mission, a commission by his father he came with an intention to step into all of this mess. If you read in the Gospels, there's this story where Jesus is at the very beginning of his ministry, and he goes back to his hometown, to Nazareth, and he steps up in front of the congregation and he opens a scroll from the Book of Isaiah, and he reads this. And this is his commissioning mandate. Here's what it says the Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me because the Lord has anointed me. The Lord has commissioned me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance. There are days where I want to worship a vengeful God. I want to worship a God who exacts judgment on evildoers. And Jesus says, AHA, yes, he is a God who will take vengeance on evil, but he also comforts all who mourn. He provides for those who grieve in Zion to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

And in that reading, Jesus touches on a lot of suffering. Suffering from poverty. There's a lot of that suffering as a result of tragedy. There's a lot of that suffering as a result of captivity and imprisonment. And if you have lived with someone with a mental illness or an addiction or abusive anger issues, then you know what it is to live imprisoned and in captivity.

And if you are the one in addiction or the one controlled by your wrath, you know what it is to be imprisoned.

Jesus talks about suffering from injustice, suffering from grief. Grief is that mix of sadness and anger when we lose something or someone we love. And Jesus says in this passage, so much is wrong, but I've come to put things back to rights. I wish it were instantaneous, don't you? Just like that, things are made right again.

He wrestles control back from us. He says, I'm taking over. You guys just do what I tell you to do. But he doesn't do that.

That would take away our ability to freely choose and freely love. It would just exchange one prison for another. Very comfortable prison, perhaps, but a prison nonetheless. Instead, Jesus invites us day after day to bring your sorrows and trade them for joy. Because from the ashes a new life is born.

Jesus is calling we sing this song oh, what a savior isn't he wonderful? Sing hallelujah christ is risen. When Christ arose, something happened in the heavenlies. The Scriptures say in one corinthians that God put everything under his feet. Hebrews says it this way now in putting everything in subjection to Him, he left nothing outside his control.

That's a relief, isn't it? God is in control. And yet notice this at present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to Him. No kidding. But I love that reminder from Jesus.

Jesus proclaims the year of the Lord's favor. God has not forsaken us. Jesus proclaims the day of God's vengeance. God has not forgotten us. Jesus proclaims comfort to all who mourn God grieves right with us.

And he promises in the midst of ashes to bring forth a crown of beauty. And he promises in the midst of our mourning to comfort us with the oil of joy. And he promises in the midst of our despair a garment of praise. One of the psalms that we read at the graveside very often is Psalm 23. I'm not going to read it, but I'm going to remind you of a couple of things from that passage.

It speaks of this dark and shadowy valley that we walk through, you know what I'm talking about?

And he says, there's light on the other side of that.

And in that little psalm, david describes how God brings good out of all of those hard, scary things. He says, God will bring us to green pastures and still waters. And some of you may be saying, yeah, I remember those days, but those are long past. I'm now in the valley of the shadow of death and mourning. But if that's you this morning, we're just going to pray here in a little bit that you can catch a glimpse of what David describes as his rod and staff comforting us.

And that rod and staff are those shepherd's tools that do two things they comfort and guide and they attack and beat off enemies. And I pray that in the middle of your suffering, you can see how God is protecting and defending you from the enemy's intentions. Because at the end of the valley of the shadow of death, david describes something that to me looks an awful lot like heaven.

Suffering points us to and prepares us for heaven. And you may say, Tim, come on, that's a preacher cop out. By and by. When the morning comes, we'll understand it better. By and by you're copping out.

I'm not copping out. Paul says in two Corinthians Four, our light and momentary troubles are working in us and achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. And the amazing thing that suffering does is it weans us from the temporary affections of the

world. It strips us of just unholy attachments and unholy attitudes that simply cannot be accommodated in heaven. Peter writes this therefore since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin.

And when we are suffering, our interest in temporal pleasures absolutely disappears. Suffering frees us from the power of the pool of sin, frees us from the pride of life, and it frees us from the enticements, the pleasures of the flesh and the temporary comforts of the here and now as we long for our home. I talked to Susan Sunday about this on Saturday, Friday about this. She goes, I just ready for Jesus to come back. I go, I get it.

I get it. That's what suffering does. It makes us really anticipate. Jesus suffering tends to remind us of the things that are really true and eternal love. I got a friend in India.

We were there several years back, and we heard word that one of the young leaders of one of the churches there had been knifed multiple times as he was preaching the gospel. He was knifed not by Hindu religious extremists, but he was knifed multiple times by his own family members.

And so we went to his bedside, and he's laying there on this very humble cot in a small airless room, and we prayed for him, and we prayed in faith that God would heal and strengthen him and restore him to life. And the whole time I'm trying to pray in faith because we are told to pray in faith. And at the same time I'm thinking, Jesus, if he must die, please let him die quickly. He didn't die. He was restored to life.

And when I checked in the last time, he was back preaching on the streets, determined to bring many with him to glory, love never fails, even in the midst of suffering. And in fact, in suffering, love seems to increase. Jesus says, Follow me, and you will have troubles. You will see and you will experience suffering. And James, his brother, says this when it happens, consider it pure joy, because when you face trials, you know that the testing of your faith is producing perseverance.

And perseverance must finish his work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. Suffering is a necessary part of our discipleship. It's a necessary component in our redemption. Blessed is the one who perseveres, he goes on, because having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life the Lord has promised to those who love him. And because troubles are a necessary part of redemption, then we can expect that troubles will not cease until the world is redeemed or no further redeemable.

Someday the end of this path that God has taken us on as our good shepherd will lead us through a last valley of the shadow. And we will come, as David says, to this broad place, this open space. And I don't know how you picture this, but I picture this psalm as David's telling this story. I picture this path, the cloud lifting. And we come above the clouds, and all of a sudden the sky is blue and clear and the sun is shining.

And there on this mountaintop plateau, there's this table spread. Can you picture it?

And we've got our little staff. It's like something out of Lord of the Rings. We're walking up and we look at the top, and there's this table spread with beautiful white linen in this most unlikely of places. And around the table is Roger and Chris and Dave Fish. And there's two little kids from Mitchell at that table.

And they're laughing and smiling because the Scripture says the Scripture says that he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Dr. Gurgas is holding those little kids. I think I'm making this stuff up, but I'm not making it up. This is the promise that we have that at the end of the dark pathway is Jesus.

No more death, no more mourning, no more crying, no more pain. And finally Jesus stands up and says, the old order has passed away. Behold, all things have become new. Ah. Are you wanting that day as much as I want that day?

This morning Jesus says, hey, come sit at the table. It is prepared by the Lord. Come, everything is ready. There's an old hymn that says it this way. All things are ready.

Come to the feast come, for the table now is spread. Ye famishing, ye weary, come and thou shalt be richly fed this brings us to a place of communion. In communion, we remember the Cross. And the Cross is about a God who humbles Himself and empties himself of power, who divests himself of control and submits himself to the brokenness of humanity. And humanity will do their can.

I say darndest with him.

They will break him, they will crush him, they will kill him, they will bury him. And they'll walk away and say, I'm so thankful that that is not the end of the story.

We have two elements in communion. We have wine and we have bread to make wine. Anyone ever made wine before? It's all right. You can admit it in church.

You have to crush grapes. Grapes must be crushed to be made into wine. And so in this upper room, where Jesus is sharing with his disciples this last meal, he takes bread. And the Scriptures say he blesses it and he breaks it. And then he lifts up this cup of wine which has been crushed and broken, and he blesses it.

Following Jesus is a life of both blessing and brokenness.

It is daily surrendering to Jesus, who gently breaks us in order that we might be given to the world just as he was. And here's the deal. The hands of Jesus are the ones who will break us.

We don't get to decide how Jesus breaks us. We're in his hands, and he will break us. The things that you are going through right now can either repel you away from God, if you let it, or you can turn to the One who is holding you in his hands and saying, lord, may this breaking be for your body. May this be for good. Work all things out for good to those who love you.

May I be an instrument of your peace and your mission, of your mandate, of your commission, of your anointing. We want to be part of that communion. Reminds me that it's not just me who's being broken and crushed together. We're being blessed and broken. And so Jesus calls us together and says, hey, you guys who are being blessed and broken, comfort one another.

Love God and love your neighbor. Carry each other's burdens. In this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ, which is love your neighbor as yourself and love God. Heavenly Father, we thank you. You were despised and rejected by mankind.

You, the Scriptures say, were a man of suffering. You are familiar with pain. You were despised as people turned and hid their faces from you. You were held in low esteem and rejected. You knew suffering.

And in our suffering you come.

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