

**ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER**  
**IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN**  
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**THE SHAPE OF OUR SUFFERING**

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Text of the Sermon preached the Fifth Sunday of Easter  
May 24, 2020

ACTS 1:6-14 | PSALM 68:1-10, 33-36  
1 PETER 4:12-14; 5:6-11 | JOHN 17:1-11

“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.” 1 Peter 4:12-13

Not a day goes by in this pandemic when we don’t hear someone remark how “strange” everything seems and feels. We all ask, “what is going on?!” We believers add: “What is your ultimate purpose here Lord?” Why all this suffering?

God's word gives us an answer, but it is a challenge. We should seek to know why we are suffering, and not turn away from suffering for doing what is right. Simply put, we Christians have a job description. We are supposed to be about the business of sharing in Christ's sufferings, thereby sharing in each other's trials, so that ultimately God's presence and power will touch us all.

Of course, the devil is in the details. Not all suffering is Christ's suffering. To hear some talk, it is as if the biggest trial of faith these days is not being able to go to church or being shamed into wearing a mask. Rather, the real trial may just be in not having someone else to blame. To be human is to suffer, but much of it is needless - senseless things we do to ourselves and others.

We Christians live by a big story. Christ's sufferings are not just an answer to the mystery of the bad things that happen to good people. If we needed an answer to every little inconvenience or test we go through we would get nowhere, we would give up. Instead, we can learn by doing, especially now. We can witness the stories of suffering around us and turn them into attention and prayer, compassion and action.

This morning Jesus invites us into the dialogue he is having with his Father. He invites us to overhear how he thinks about his suffering and how he prays for us. He invites us to begin that dialogue with him, and to learn to pray ourselves into a deeper understanding of and compassion for what is going on around us.

I don't know about you, but I have been praying much more. And that simple act has shown me how much of what I was focused on before was taking me away from living my best life, a full life.

As we draw closer to God's heart, we can see that we are suffering because we have lost the illusion that we are in control of our lives. We can see that we are suffering because we used to ignore the discrimination, the poverty, the humiliation of others. But now we cannot ignore each other's fate. We are suffering so much because we are beginning to see the extent of how broken and separated we are from one another.

Jesus saw all this. He humbled himself to take on our nature and to experience this brokenness. And so he knows that the only antidote is God. God with us. God's presence breaking in. Jesus is not afraid to go down, because he knows God raises up.

Jesus allows us to listen in to his final prayer on earth. A prayer for oneness in the face of so much separation, anger and fear. In this prayer he is reaching up and out to his Father, and is rehearsing the prayer he is saying for us even now. He is praying we look beyond our individual trials, and see what is being revealed of how the world needs to change.

The real news, after all, may very well be about what we are doing to God's creation. This virus is not novel to nature. Only to humans who have contracted it most likely because we have not been respecting nature. Some historians tells us of the miracle of lessening of human violence. But along with that is the story of an ever more endangered earth.

The real news, after all, may be what gifts the human mind and spirit is doing together to meet this challenge. We have to give nature and each other more room to breathe. Whether we discover a vaccine or not, the pandemic is teaching us, if we are learning anything at all, about finding a new balance with nature and all God's creatures.

Having some of these things in mind, we can hear Jesus' prayer for us, and the apostle's striking words with fresh ears:

"Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you." 1 Peter 5:6-7

And beware the evil one. Listen for the one who creates confusion. The devil. He does not care for you. The virus is an enemy. It is, however, not THE enemy. The enemy tempts us to separate ourselves from the truth and see each other as the enemy.

Person against person. Humanity against God's creation. Fear and distrust tempting us to forget God's gifts and graces, the power of the Spirit that God has for each of us, to keep loving each other and to keep us from falling into sin and despair.

Jesus is praying for us right now. Praying that across time and space, through resistance and struggle, through sickness and suffering, through poverty and plenty, that we connect and receive his power.

He is praying that we see and understand that he ascends to the Father so that his presence may fill all things. He prays that we will seek that presence and let that power shape our lives.

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So cast your cares on him. He cares for you. And your life will take new shape. It will take the shape of Christ’s life in you. One by one, as he makes us one humanity. What is taking shape is the glory of God filling all in all.