

**Kailua Christian Church (UCC)**  
**Third Sunday of Advent – December 11, 2022**  
**“The Experiencing of Suffering: The Fullest Expression of God’s Love”**  
**Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:14-18**  
**Pastor Clive Cowell**

Aloha and good morning.

**The experience of suffering: the fullest expression of God’s love.**

There is a wonderful, truly wonderful passage in 2 Cor. 4 that sets the scene for today’s message.

*“We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.*

*Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”*

Suffering is the content of the message today.  
We’ve all experienced it, or, we *will* all experience it.

We try to avoid it, we try to medicate it, we try to overcome it. We tell stories about suffering. The news is full of suffering. The world is full of suffering.

Often times, we fight against suffering. As for me, I’ve had cancer three times. I’ve had multiple surgeries, chemotherapy that in all honesty was worse than the disease, radiotherapy and, probably, I’ve had dozens of CT scans – enough X-rays to light up a village. And, for anyone whose been through cancer... the common phrase you hear people saying is this: *“it’s the fight against cancer.”* We fight against suffering. And, I’m not the only one who’s done that... we all fight in some way or other.

Sometimes it’s a just fight against the disease, but let’s be candid, sometimes it’s a fight against what we deep down feel is a war against the injustice of God. *“Why am I going through this?”* Why is the outward wasting away? And, God, do you really think that my troubles are light? Do you really think they are momentary? How can I fix my eyes on what is unseen?

So, what is it about suffering that we should truly know?

Perhaps it is this. Suffering is a gift from God.

Now that might sound impossible, improbable, implausible, but my testimony today, in this privilege to speak here, is that suffering is a gift.

All our outer nature is wasting away. We don't need the Bible to tell us that, though it does

What we need to know is that our inner nature is being renewed. And, it's being renewed every day.

This life, no matter how long it lasts, is truly a momentary affliction preparing us for eternal glory.

As a hospice chaplain, I meet people who've been told that there is nothing left to do but bring comfort and care as a person dies. Medicines will no longer work. Surgeries will no longer help. The only thing to do is be comforted.

It is truly beautiful to be with these patients and their families.

For your care groups that meet mid-week and you want some questions to ask each other, I present these for you:

- (1) How am I responding to suffering?**
- (2) How should I respond to it?**
- (3) Am I learning from it?**
- (4) Does my response demonstrate faith, love for God and for others, Christ-like character, values, commitment, priorities, etc.?**
- (5) How can God use it in my life?**

I'll also share today how you can make some sense of things as you go through suffering. Because any suffering you have is a part of a bigger picture of your life. And if you have a bigger picture of your life, and therefore a bigger picture of your suffering, then the suffering will make sense... in part... and more importantly, there is a chance that you'll see it as a gift. Yes, a gift. And, we'll get to that promise at the end of this message but first...

Here are five P's that I share with patients and families to help them through the suffering of dying.

Place; People; Pain; Preparation; and Promise.

### The first P is place.

When you are really sick, when you are dying, perhaps in fever or even confusion one of the first things you will do is try to work out, “*where am I?*” That’s how our body works... it wants to know where it is. And, for sure, when we don’t know where we are... when we are lost... fear comes.

So, understanding our place is important, because we don’t want suffering + fear. To that end, I encourage families to share pictures of places that bring comfort to a loved one. They remind us of good times, celebrations, victories won, challenges overcome.

### **I’ll give this word of encouragement: give thanks for places.**

At the same time, there are some bad places we might not choose to remember. They are painful reminders of loss, pain, shame even. I don’t recommend having pictures of those, but I do recommend asking the Lord help me understand those bad places for what they really were. Which brings us back to 5 questions to process. In this case let’s frame them in terms of “bad” places we’ve experienced. Ask the Lord...

**(1) How did I respond to suffering in that place?** Be honest with yourself and God. Live in truth and let God take away any shadows.

**(2) How should I have responded to it?** Maybe you actually responded the best way you could have – in which case, if you took what was the best path, it’s time to release. On the other hand, maybe you didn’t take the best path – so is it now time to ask and then accept God’s mercy and grace? Forgive us our trespasses as we have forgiven those who have trespassed against us. We can confess our sins, knowing that God is faithful and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. For as far as the east is from the west, that is how far God will remove our sin from us (Psalm 103:12).

**(3) Did I learn something from it and am I better for it?** Am I learning from it? Remember that when everything is perfect, when there are no challenges, we really don’t learn much. But suffering is actually the place where we do learn. And if we learn, even through suffering, can we give thanks?

**(4) Did my response demonstrate faith, love for God and for others, Christ-like character, values, commitment, priorities, etc.?** Again, we can give thanks or we can give confession.

**(5) How can God use it in my life?** And, finally, even though there may have been some bad places in your life, did God use that in you and through you, could God still yet use that to bring Him glory?

### The second P is people.

Going through suffering WITHOUT people is just miserable. I’ve seen so

many people in hospital beds with no one ever going to visit them. That's acute suffering – it's painful. Much like places in our lives, we have good and bad experiences.

Many families have family photos readily available, and some make highly creative binders. If you have videos of the past or if you have old photos, you can have a video made that will bring many wonderful memories for your loved one and your family. Of course, remembrances of some people in the past cause a negative response and even strong emotions. If the issues of the past are extreme, then a counselor may be needed.

**I'll give this word of encouragement: give thanks for people.**

And, as with places, so with people, we can be thankful and, of course, we can confess to bring cleansing.

The third P is pain.

Pain, of course, is the body's way of telling the mind that something is wrong and for the body to take corrective action. So, we should pay attention to it and not ignore it.

Suffering will preoccupy the mind in very intense ways and it can make a person tired, anxious, depressed and well, downright grumpy! Our attitudes in response to suffering can make the pain worse, and candidly, it is very easy to slip into a downward spiral.

That's why it is so important to be cared for and comforted. You need to give yourself the freedom to share your pain because it will help. And if you are caring for someone, You might ask: "*Would you like to talk about your pain this morning? If so, I am here to listen.*" Talk about the pain they are experiencing, listening with your fullest attention to your loved one. This may be uncomfortable for you, but the idea is to let your loved one talk and for them to feel connected. Allowing a person to share their pain verbally will help them in their mind to reinforce what the body and mind need to process. In that respect, if it is appropriate, simply say these three words to your loved: "I believe you."

Saying, "I believe you" is just as important as saying, "I love you." If someone feels like they have someone with them on the journey it will help their pain.

Bottom line: remember this from Jeremiah...

*"... I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."*

God has plans for all of us – every single person. He has a plan.

God will never say to you, or you, or you... *“Oh, You... sorry, I don’t have a plan for you.”* NO, no, no.

If you listen to Him, He will comfort you... *“I have a plan for you.”*

*I’ll give this word of encouragement: give thanks for pain.*

#### The fourth P is Preparation

When suffering comes, and it will, many people have this fear or realized fear: *“I didn’t do enough”,* or *“I should have planned more, I should have been more prepared.”*

My dentist is always telling me, *“If you don’t floss your teeth... they will go away!”*

Preparation takes work and planning. In this season, I personally have been spending much more time contemplating, preparing, planning. Part of this has involved decluttering my life so I can have space for when life becomes more challenging – for the possibility of being prepared if or when suffering will come.

There is an old Chinese proverb. It is better to be a warrior in a garden, than a gardener in a war. As the Scouts have long said... be prepared.

And the Bible, more importantly, has 159 mentions of preparing. One of them is a Proverb.

*“The prudent sees danger and hides himself, but the simple go on and suffer for it.”* Proverbs 22:3.

Peter, a man who suffered a lot through all his trials and failings noted this at the end of his life:

*“Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”* 1 Peter 1:13

That’s the best preparation of all.

**I’ll give this word of encouragement: give thanks for preparation.**

The fifth P is promise.

Should we pray for an easy life? Maybe.

Maybe not.

Maybe we should better pray for the strength to endure a difficult one.

The experience of suffering is I believe, the fullest expression of God's love.

I'll say it again...

*The experience of suffering is I believe, the fullest expression of God's love.*

Suffering brings us the opportunity to bring us to be closer to God.

No one suffers the same.

No one suffers righteously like Christ did.

No one suffers perfectly.

For sure not me.

And, when you think about it, even Christ Himself had a moment of despair.  
Deep despair.

*"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

The deepest question that the Son asked... and He asked it from the cross... He asked it from the place of persecution... He asked it from the place of suffering, *"Why have you forsaken me?"*

To ask God, *"why have you forsaken me?"* is NOT an academic question. It is not an intellectual question. It's not a question Christ asked ONLY so that we could learn some educational truth. No.

Not, for Christ... This question came from His heart.

It is a painful question; it is an emotional question. He asks His Father,  
*"Why have You forsaken me?"*

Some believe that in that moment Christ felt a moment of betrayal. **Why have you forsaken me?**

Lord, on this pulpit I will not presume to say that that is in fact what Christ felt; *betrayal*. I do not know, nor can I know what He truly felt, but still, Jesus asked the question, *"why have you forsaken me?"*

... if betrayal, then it is one of the deepest psychological pains anyone can go through. Christ asked... *"why have you forsaken me?"*

Dante, famous writer, put it this way, regarding betrayal: *“The worst sinners, in [the] underworld, were the traitors—those who betrayed their loved ones, their country, and their God.*

Christ suffered. Physically, emotionally and spiritually at the deepest, if not the deepest of levels that any human has experienced.

Christ who was sinless took on our sins and was judged by God. He took what we deserve... because He loved us.

Because He loves us.

***The experience of suffering is I believe, the fullest expression of God’s love.***

And that love, that love can make the worst sinner, the worst person, the most distant person... a believer.

Because, in suffering, when the love of God comes to you, it is like no other.

To lead you all to find and feel that love, God sends some of us suffering. And for those who feel His love, in suffering, and help others, it is the most scenic route to take on the way to death.

And for that, I give thanks.

The final P of these 5 is the promise that God brings... even when we suffer.

God promises that “He will heal the broken hearted, He will bind the wounded (Psalm 147:3).”

God promises “He will wipe every tear (Rev. 21:4)”

God promises that “whoever believes in Me, even though He dies, will live (John 11:25).”

God promises that “there will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain (Rev 21:4)”

God promises us that He will “comfort us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from Him (2 Cor. 1:4).

He is the resurrection

He is the life.

YES... Whoever believes in Jesus, though he die, yet shall he live, and

everyone who lives and believes in Jesus.... shall never die (John 11:25-26).

As we close, remember, when you go through suffering that there is a place, there are people, there is pain, there is preparation, and there is a promise to how you cope. You can ask

- (1) How am I responding to it?**
- (2) How should I respond to it?**
- (3) Am I learning from it?**
- (4) Does my response demonstrate faith, love for God and for others, Christ-like character, values, commitment, priorities, etc.?**
- (5) And, how can God use it in my life?**

Of course, if we can avoid suffering and pain, we should. But, as I've said three times already,

The experience of suffering is I believe, the fullest expression of God's love.

It's truly hard to feel God's love when you suffer. It is, but, when you do feel it, His love... there is no other love.

Amen.

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There is a wonderful, truly wonderful passage in 2 Cor. 4 that sets the scene for today's message.

“We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

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the east is from the west, that is how far God will remove our sin from us (Psalm 103:12).

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Suffering will preoccupy the mind in very intense ways and it can make a person tired, anxious, depressed and well, downright grumpy! Our attitudes in response to suffering can make the pain worse, and candidly, it is very easy to slip into a downward spiral.

That's why it is so important to be cared for and comforted. You need to give yourself the freedom to share your pain because it will help. And if you

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Saying, “I believe you” is just as important as saying, “I love you.”

If someone feels like they have someone with them on the journey it will help their pain.

Bottom line: remember this from Jeremiah...

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God has plans for all of us – every single person. He has a plan.

God will never say to you, or you, or you... “Oh, You... sorry, I don’t have a plan for you.” NO, no, no.

If you listen to Him, He will comfort you... “I have a plan for you.”

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### The fourth P is Preparation

When suffering comes, and it will, many people have this fear or realized fear: “I didn’t do enough”, or “I should have planned more, I should have been more prepared.”

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I’ll say it again...

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No one suffers perfectly.

For sure not me.

And, when you think about it, even Christ Himself had a moment of despair.

Deep despair.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

The deepest question that the Son asked... and He asked it from the cross... He asked it from the place of persecution... He asked it from the place of suffering, “Why have you forsaken me?”

To ask God, “why have you forsaken me?” is NOT an academic question. It is not an intellectual question. It’s not a question Christ asked ONLY so that we could learn some educational truth. No.

Not, for Christ... This question came from His heart.

It is a painful question; it is an emotional question. He asks His Father, “Why have You forsaken me?”

Some believe that in that moment Christ felt a moment of betrayal. Why have you forsaken me?

Lord, on this pulpit I will not presume to say that that is in fact what Christ felt; betrayal. I do not know, nor can I know what He truly felt, but still, Jesus asked the question, “why have you forsaken me?”

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He is the resurrection

He is the life.

YES... Whoever believes in Jesus, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Jesus.... shall never die (John 11:25-26).

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