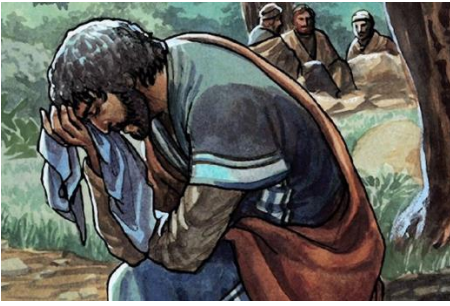


Faith Despite Unbelief  
Sermon for the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent (Judika)  
Sermon Text: Hebrews 5:7-9



*In the days of His flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to Him who was able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His reverence. <sup>8</sup> Although He was a son, He learned obedience through what He suffered. <sup>9</sup> And being made perfect, He became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, ...*

It's a fact that people suffer, and sometimes in such a way that it leaves us speechless. It's a fact that we suffer and sometimes in such a way that the ground is pulled out from under our feet and we can only fall to the ground, powerless and helpless. It's a fact that many people experience horrible things in many places in the world. Sometimes it hits you personally and massively with a terrible catastrophe in your private life. Sometimes, suffering affects an entire nation so that all the people in a particular country or in a war suffocate under the unremovable dark cloud of suffering. Sometimes suffering is like a cancer that slowly and steadily spreads throughout the body until the whole person is eventually infected with it.

The letter to the Hebrews from which our verses are taken, was first addressed to people who were in just such a situation. They suffered what people suffer from at all times: They suffered, for example, from conflict and contempt because as Christians, they were marginalized by their fellow countrymen. As a result of the contempt, a social downgrading came with it. The Christians at that time suffered, therefore, from poverty and insecure financial conditions. It was a life that was also under constant threat because Christians were randomly killed back then. And the question Christians asked at that time was this: What does God have to do with all this? This question isn't new. It is probably the most frequently asked question in our baptism class. "Why does God allow suffering to happen?"

The letter to the Hebrews doesn't give a philosophical answer to the meaning of suffering. Instead, it connects suffering in a wonderful way to Jesus and His incarnation. Because from all that we know about Jesus and from all that the letter to the Hebrews also knows about Jesus and His origin, one could come to the idea that Jesus was a kind of "god-man" who was always a few meters above normal people. According to this opinion, Jesus was never truly man but always remained in essence God and floated high above people. Looking at it this way, His hands would never get dirty, and He would never suffer because He would always have one foot in heaven. But this idea is a mistake because Jesus became fully human with all the consequences. He didn't become half-human, but completely human. In the verses that we read today, Jesus' humanity is explained in very concrete words, particularly in His suffering. And all of this is established with a peculiar sentence: "Jesus learned obedience." Especially in connection to Jesus, this sentence is strange. And we must ask the question: "How can it be that Jesus, who is God, still had something to learn?" A divine being is not expected to have to learn anything. So a divine being lives in eternal harmony without any problems. No, the power of Jesus' incarnation is precisely this – that He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped (Phil. 2:6) but truly became human, so much so that He set aside His holy divine will for a human will. As a result, He actually experienced all temptations of the human will. So His path of suffering to Jerusalem was not an act, but real suffering. And Jesus really had to learn obedience. This is all shown to us once again in the Garden of Gethsemane. "Not what I will, but what You will," Jesus prayed. (Mark 14:36) By doing this, Jesus fulfilled the third petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Thy will be done!" and the first Commandment, that we should love God above all things. Jesus does this willingly and deliberately. It is a war that He waged with His own will and with Satan. This made me think of another story which should also be preached on the Sunday of Judika: the story of Abraham who had to sacrifice his own son. Abraham had already laid his son on the altar like a sacrificial lamb, his hand already raised and holding a knife... Only then, at the last moment, the voice of God holds him back. "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear [obey] God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." (Gen. 22:12) Obedience has a cruel side and we see that especially in Jesus' story of suffering. Jesus also stood at the knife's edge and could have said

“no” back in the Garden of Gethsemane. Yet, He didn’t do that. He was “obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8) and there was no angel with a loud voice there to save Jesus from the worst.

Jesus did all of this because He knew unconditionally that He was in the hands of the living God. Dear congregation, now I feel how much this obedience is related to faith! And I consider obedience and faith related to a third point: Trust! And really, we could always substitute trust where we hear about obedience. So although He was God’s Son, He learned to trust by what He suffered. And with Abraham: “...now I know that you [trust] God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” Does the word trust take us further?

I think so! Now if there is a lesson we should learn in our life in this world, it is this: that we can trust God despite all experiences, even if everything contradicts His love. We can see all this in Jesus. He was obedient to God. He believed in God and He trusted God to the very end. And the end result was that He believed in God even when He was forsaken by God. God had truly forsaken Jesus. And yet, despite all unbelief, Jesus believed. We can’t grasp what this means. The letter to the Hebrews describes this with the words: “loud cries and tears.” We express this with these words in the Apostolic Creed: “suffered... crucified... died.” Jesus was handed over to brutal suffering. This means that Jesus personally had to bear the whole force of Satan and Hell. Normally, we experience suffering as something meaningless, but the suffering of Jesus was not meaningless. On the contrary, God wanted it to be this way. Because of this, it becomes clear that God doesn’t leave the world alone in the state it’s in. God ultimately wants to save us, not ruin us. God doesn’t want people from around the world to remain in misery and be forsaken by God until the end of time. He wants suffering to have an end. In Jesus, we can recognize this path of God which supports us in our suffering. We can recognize that we aren’t alone in suffering because Jesus shares and experiences every human sorrow with us. On the other hand, we know that God has set a limit for suffering through Jesus because we also know that the dove of peace can’t just come flying down from heaven. No, the dove of peace needs strong armor so that they can survive. And this armor is Jesus Himself. Jesus is the final consequence and result of all suffering and injustice. Jesus is the one who had to experience the terrible consequences without restraint. Jesus is the one who, despite all the injustice of the world, is obedient. He remained obedient even in the deepest abandonment by God. In this way, He set a limit on suffering. And not just a limit, He also showed us a way out. In doing so, He has opened a path for us, and for all who suffer – a way into another world where there will be “no more sorrow, no more crying, no more pain” because the old has passed away and the new has come. Amen.