



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

6th Wednesday in Lent (4/17/2019)

Sermon Title: "Rescue"

Sermon Texts: Psalm 34:14, 17-19; John 9:1-7

When you heard the first verse of our Psalm, did it make you wince just a bit? Listen to it again: "When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears, and rescues them from all their troubles." What do you think? Does the Lord hear us whenever we call? I believe so. And I hope you do too. It's the second part of the verse that may be troubling. Does the Lord always rescue us from our troubles?

The answer, as you might expect, is somewhat complicated. If we think we can pluck this verse out of the Bible and use it like an insurance policy that will shield us from all suffering, troubles, and pain, then most days we're going to be very disappointed. We know that life just doesn't work that way. Our world is filled with examples of good people who endure bad and even tragic things. I'm sure we could all identify incidents like this that've happened in recent months in our world, our community, and even in our families.

So how do we make sense of our suffering? That's the question in our Gospel reading. When faced with a man blind from birth, the disciples assumed it was a punishment from God. The only question in their mind was whether the blindness was intended to punish a sin of the *man* or a sin of his *parents*. Jesus's response was to reject *both* options and to instead affirm that blindness wasn't a punishment for *anyone's* sin. *Instead*, it was an opportunity for God to be revealed.

People in crisis commonly question why they are suffering. My first response is to affirm that their crisis is not a punishment. Nothing in my theological training suggests that God spends each day arbitrarily putting scourges on people. We live in a broken and imperfect world, and because of that sometimes bad things happen to good people. I don't know why it has to be that way. But what I do know is that whenever we're in a crisis, God is right there with us.

Think of the inevitability of human suffering like winter in Central PA. Winter comes every year, whether we like it or not. And each winter, it'll be cold, snowy, and icy no matter how righteous we are or how much we gripe. And so if it's going to be winter anyway, we might as well find a way to draw something positive out of it. The same is true of our sufferings.

One of my theological heroes is a French nun named Thérèse of Lisieux, who tragically died of tuberculosis in 1897, at the tender age of 24. In many ways she was not your typical nun. In childhood she was spoiled and babied. In her teenage years she could be impulsive. And even as a young adult, her crooked smile hinted at a mischievous personality.

But in the letters little Thérèse left behind at her death, and the remarkable autobiography she penned in her final, pain-filled days, a spiritual giant was revealed. Thérèse is best known for her “Little Way.” The essence of it is to become *small* by joyfully accepting our limitations, faults, imperfections, and sufferings, so that we’re free to surrender to the perfect love of Jesus. Thérèse didn’t allow herself to get sidetracked trying to be perfect or doing great acts of worldly acclaim. Instead, she took delight in doing the little things she was capable of doing, like extending a kindness to a difficult person or performing a simple favor for someone. In each of those *little* things, God’s *massive* love was revealed. It was a grace-filled insight that Thérèse might never have attained if she hadn’t achieved peace with her littleness of spirit.

You see, when the Psalm states that the Lord will “rescue us from all our troubles,” it doesn’t mean that our troubles will magically go away. Instead, it’s God’s promise that, by God’s grace, God will find a way to draw some good from even the worst of situations, and in doing so, God’s love and peace are revealed in ways that otherwise wouldn’t have been possible. It enables us to see ourselves and our circumstances with new eyes. There’s no better example of this than the cross itself, where God transformed punishment into peace, and suffering into salvation.

Another example comes from the life of a man named Jim Conlon. As a baby, Jim was stricken by polio that left him with one leg a few inches shorter than the other and a permanent limp. As a high school student at Fordham Prep in the 1940s, Jim’s condition made him very different from his classmates. High school isn’t a time when most people want to stand out in that way. And so he became withdrawn, bitter, and mired in self-pity. Seeing this, one of the Jesuit priests at the school confronted Jim with a provocative question. “Jim, are you glad you have polio?” Jim was livid. “No, I’m not glad I have polio!” The priest responded, “Son, until the day comes when you can say to God and really mean it, ‘Lord, I’m glad I have polio,’ you’ll never amount to anything!”¹

That evening, Jim’s anger and resentment at the priest’s challenge continued to grow, until finally, like a fever, it broke and the tears began to flow. To his shock, he was finally able to say “Lord, I’m glad I have polio.” The words themselves weren’t magic. But what they revealed was a young man who could finally accept and love himself, confident that the gifts he had were exactly what he needed to make a difference in this world. It was the turning point in his life. He became a priest and touched countless lives through his ministry – a ministry that was informed and transformed due to Jim’s ability to be at peace and to see himself and his circumstances in a new light – a Godly light. By God’s grace and Thérèse’s Little Way, Father Jim was, as the Psalm says, *rescued from all his troubles*.

Just a few days ago I marked the seventh anniversary of one of the worst days of my life. It was the day my daughter Annika suffered a major concussion and traumatic brain injury. She endured significant memory loss, balance issues, eye problems, and crippling headaches. She couldn’t continue high school, and college seemed like an impossibility. It was as if all possibility and promise had been drained from the life of our bright, vibrant 14 year old. Some days I got really mad at God for what had happened. It seemed so unfair. I’m guessing each of you could tell a similar story from your own life.

But in the midst of our suffering, I discovered that God was present in ways I hadn't noticed, and able to see our situation with a fullness that was beyond my vision. As we gradually adapted to Annika's "new normal," new possibilities became apparent. Instead of breaking and destroying her, the experience refined and strengthened her. It's hard to believe, but in less than a month, she graduates from college and her future is bright. I don't think God caused her concussion and injuries. But God used those injuries to transform and bless her in ways I was too blind to envision. I confess I'm not yet at a point where I can thank God for what Annika and our family had to endure. But I *can* acknowledge that, as the Psalm states, our Lord was near the brokenhearted and saved the crushed in spirit. Our Lord heard our cry for help and rescued us from our troubles by helping us to see things through new eyes. And in that process, God gave us peace.

Friends, to be human is to suffer. I don't know why that is; it's just part of our condition. And so if we must suffer, let's not waste it. God certainly doesn't. We can trust in the promise that God will always be present with us and, somehow, someday, God will draw blessings out of our troubles. May that promise fill you with peace. Amen.

Citations

1. See P. Ahern, *Three Gifts of Thérèse of Lisieux*, pp. 82-85 (Image, 2014)