

FROM TERRIBLE LOSS TO SURE HOPE
a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, April 28, 2019
Based on 1 Peter 1:3–9, 2:21–25

A sermon entitled, “From Terrible Loss to Sure Hope” might be understood as a description of a Cleveland Indians baseball season. After every terrible loss, there is a rebound and a reason to hope again. But the title actually is intended to describe our human story, as it comes to focus especially in the Bible.

On Easter Sunday we were aggrieved by the reports of terrible loss in Sri Lanka, as terrorists murdered more than 200 people, many of them attending Easter worship. It was one of the worst losses of life in the history of terrorist attacks on churches, and it was an especially glaring example of just how evil human beings can be.

Many of our worst experiences of loss are tied directly to human sinfulness. We often see people brutalizing one another, in warfare or crimes or various forms of exploitation. At the same time, there are also many cases where people are not intentionally causing harm, but where they engage in self-centered behaviors that still result in negative consequences. People end up hurting other people and hurting the planet, wrecking the whole environment, because they are too self-focused. The Bible describes all this behavior with the word “sin”—which denotes a falling away from who we are intended to be as God’s people, so that we end up in destructive ways of living.

During the course of Biblical history, the reality that human sin causes a great deal of trouble led some people to the conclusion that whenever something bad happens, it must be because someone sinned. According to this line of thought, if you experience any sort of loss, it is because you sinned, or someone sinned, and the loss is the consequence. But as soon as this kind of thinking really got rolling, around the sixth century B.C., God’s Word set it straight—in the book of Job. Job is the story of a man who was good as anyone gets, but he encountered enormous loss in life. The book of Job is a clear Biblical statement that sometimes bad things simply happen to good people, and it is not the result of anyone’s sin. Throughout the book of Job, Job asks the question “Why”—Why are these bad things happening to me, when I have been such a good and faithful person? It is the sort of question that people often ask today. We ask this question even when we understand on some level why a bad thing happened. In Sri Lanka, we understand that the massacres happened last weekend because God gives people the moral freedom to do good or evil, and some people in Sri Lanka chose to do evil. But even in such a case where we can “explain” a loss by pointing to human sin, we are not satisfied. We still ask, “But why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen to those good and faithful people who were in church?”

In the book of Job, Job does not finally get an answer to the question of “why,” because God tells him, quite emphatically near the end of the book, that from his limited time-bound, earthly perspective he can never understand the ways of God. But what Job

receives is something far more than an explanation of trouble. He experiences the presence of God, and God finally is at work to bring him into new and yet greater good.

The fundamental insight of the book of Job—that the real answer to trouble is not an explanation of it but the experience of the saving presence of God—is in fact a theme that you can see again and again in the Biblical story. One of the basic observations that you could make about the Bible is that it is a repeating story of terrible loss. This is one reason the Bible is such a powerful book—it does not sugarcoat human existence, or try to put a happy spin on things, but confronts the reality of human trouble head-on. The Bible tells about one loss after another. Adam and Eve lose paradise. Later generations lose everything in a flood. God calls Abraham to the Promised Land, but his descendants scarcely get established when they lose their freedom and become slaves in Egypt. Generations later, after they have gained their freedom and finally become well established in the Promised Land, they lose it all again when they are conquered by the Babylonian empire and carried off into exile.

Sometimes in these losses it was possible to find some explanation for why catastrophe happened. Often human sinfulness played a role—the people were victimized by the wickedness of the Egyptians and the Babylonians, and they frequently ended up in trouble because they themselves had forgotten God. But even as the Bible points clearly to the problem of sin, the focus in Biblical stories is not finally on explaining why bad things happen but on how God is present in the midst of trouble and sin and is at work for deliverance. And God works not simply to bring people out of trouble but to bring them into a future far greater and more meaningful than what they ever had before. In the story of the people's bondage in Egypt, the Bible tells of how God worked not only to enable the people to escape slavery but to become a people that would be a vehicle of God's plan of salvation for the world. In the story of the exile in Babylon, the Bible tells of how God worked not only to enable the people to move back to their homeland in Judah, but to become a people who would set the stage for the coming of the Messiah. Note how this deliverance of God is ultimately a deliverance to be able to share profoundly in God's purposes.

It was through this experience of God's power of deliverance that the people of Israel were able to find a sure hope even when they were in the midst of terrible loss. The Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann once observed that the Old Testament prophets had a kind of hope that simply is not seen anywhere else in the ancient world. These ancient Hebrew people found hope even when things looked terrible, and nothing made sense, and there did not seem to be any reason for optimism. They found hope because they looked to God. They knew that God was with them and that God was at work in ways far beyond what they could understand, to bring about a future in which they would be a part of God's glorious purposes. This whole trajectory of finding hope in the midst of trouble would come finally to its ultimate expression in Jesus.

During his ministry, Jesus sometimes encountered the old idea that illness must be a punishment for sin. Once when encountering a man born blind, the disciples asked Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2) Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind . . .” (John 9:3) Jesus made clear, like the book of Job, that there often is no explanation for trouble, and we cannot pin every problem on somebody’s sin. But Jesus went on to say, “He was born blind . . . so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” (John 9:3) God would be at work in the midst of that trouble to bring about deliverance, and to carry out good purpose. Jesus then touched the man and healed him—a healing that would impact many others.

People thus found in Jesus not an explanation of trouble but an experience of the presence of God to rescue us from trouble and to open up a new future in which we could be a part of God’s eternal purposes. This theme would come then to its culmination on the cross and on Easter.

When the disciples stood before the cross, none of it seemed to make any sense, nor did there seem to be any reason for hope. It appeared to be the ultimate case of human evil taking its toll on a good and faithful person. For the disciple Peter in particular, it was not only impossible to explain what was happening on the cross; it was also impossible to explain his own reactions. How was it, after three years with Jesus and a personal professional of loyalty, that Peter had managed to so miserably fail and deny Jesus in the moment of trial? It was Paul who would later write, “I do not understand my own actions” (Romans 7:15); but those words were certainly what Peter felt, and perhaps what we all feel at times. At the cross, none of the disciples could understand anything, they all felt like failures, everything looked horrible, and none of them were feeling the least bit hopeful.

Yet there on the cross, God was present—fully present—with humanity, connecting with us in all of our sinfulness and our weakness and our pain. And God was at work to deliver us into an entirely new future. That deliverance unfolds in the two great movements of Easter weekend. First, Jesus on the cross deals decisively with the problem of human sin. Sin is not only the source of many troubles; but sin at its root is alienation from God; and as long as we are alienated from God we will never find hope because we will never come into connection with God. On the cross Jesus atones for our sin so that even in our flaws we can be restored into fellowship with God. As that passage we heard from the first letter of Peter expressed it, “Christ bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sin, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls. (1 Peter 2:24–25) Having reconciled us with God, Jesus then can open up for us an entirely new future, which is precisely what happens on Easter. In the resurrection, God acts to bring us into a bright destiny in which we share in God’s purposes forever.

Significantly, Peter would experience the power of both the cross and the resurrection in an especially decisive way. Several days after Easter, the Risen Christ met Peter by the Sea of Galilee. Peter was still struggling with his personal sense of sin and failure, but Jesus made him know that he was forgiven; Peter experienced profoundly the mercy that Jesus brings through the cross. Then Jesus called Peter to be a leader in the new church. It was a powerful example of that Biblical theme that the new future that God opens up for us is a future in which we are not simply brought into a better place—it may be that we are brought into a more challenging place, as was certainly the case for Peter—but it is a future in which we are enabled to share in the eternal purposes of God, so that, as Peter says, we can “live for righteousness.” Peter would subsequently become a key apostle in the church; and he would become a prime example of someone who out of terrible loss was able to find a sure hope.

That hope is what is expressed in the Scripture passage which we heard earlier from I Peter chapter one, where Peter writes, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” (I Peter 1:3) Peter himself certainly had a “new birth into a living hope,” but he is also speaking of the hope that he knew would sustain his readers. It is significant that he uses the phrase “living hope”—a hope that is vibrant and that keeps on through times of challenge. The letter of I Peter was addressed to first century Christians who were suffering some severe persecution, much as Christians in Sri Lanka and other parts of the world are being persecuted today. Peter acknowledges their suffering and suggests that the answer to it is to trust in Christ and to share in the unfolding of that new future that Christ would bring about through each of us. As he said, “In this hope you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed . . . for even though you do not see Him, you believe in Him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” (I Peter 3:6–9)

For Peter, the experience of even terrible loss and trial cannot keep us from hope when we put our faith in Christ and take our place in the working of His Kingdom.

Centuries ago, when Portuguese sailing ships were trying to sail around the southern tip of Africa in order to get to India, they encountered extremely rough waters, as the region off that cape was beset with near constant gale force winds and storms. The Portuguese explorer Bartolomeu Dias named it “The Cape of Storms.” But ultimately ships managed to get through into the calmer waters of the Indian Ocean and found clear sailing to the rich trade regions of India. The Portuguese king changed the name of the cape from “The Cape of Storms” to “The Cape of Good Hope.”

We may find ourselves at times at the cape of storms. We may not understand why a particular storm is hitting, and we may wonder how we are possibly going to get through.

But when we put our faith in Christ, we are no longer at the cape of storms; we are at the cape of good hope—because no matter what troubles may rage we have the sure hope that Christ is leading us toward a good and bright future. So we are encouraged to sail on in faith, and to be a part of what Christ can do through us, so that, along with Peter, we can “rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for we are receiving the outcome of our faith, the salvation of our souls.”