

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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John 3:14-21 **Inform or Transform?**

When people are asked "why do you attend church?", one frequent response (in addition to the response "to worship God" is the response "to learn about God". Perhaps if you asked yourself the same question ("why do I attend church?"), you also might reply "to learn about God and Jesus". As we enter the fourth Sunday in Lent, let us take the opportunity to explore this common response "to learn about God". Our first scripture reading is from the 5th book of Psalms. Upon a close reading of the sections or the entire Psalm we ask ourselves similarly, why is the Psalmist crying out to God? What is Psalmist seeking in this lamentation? Is he asking a question of God, a point of *information*? In verse 19 (Psalm 107) we read, "*Then they cried out to God in their trouble.*" And we see by the outcome provided in the same verse, "*God saved them from their distress.*" Their prayers were not to seek *information* from God, but rather to seek relief and *transformation*.

There is nothing so consuming to us earthly creatures than pain and

suffering. Suffering may be the consequence of our own doing; God gave humans free will and so must accept our fallen nature. Through the love of Jesus Christ we are brought to understand the boundless love and grace that showers down on our imperfect lives. But what about the suffering that befalls us without our invitation, how are we to respond in these cases? Physical sickness, emotional sickness, separation, and death, these afflictions cause all of God's creatures to suffer.

When we suffer often we do so stoically, thinking that it is a private matter that we simply must endure on our own. But the Psalmist gives us insight, to cry out to God for relief is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of strength. We know that when we pray, we ask "Lord hear our prayers" and signify our deepest bond to the Lord, we are the children of God. Just as you welcome the crying out of a child in distress or pain so that we may intervene, so too God expects us to turn towards our one and only God who gave us life to cry out in suffering and seek relief. As Christians, Jesus

Christ is our portal to God, demonstrating in the pain of Good Friday and the celebration of Easter (He has risen), that in the suffering of Jesus on the cross, God was responding to the sufferings of fallen humans and in Jesus we die on Good Friday and we are risen in Him in the glory of Easter morning.

But what is our role in the eternal cycle of suffering and redemption in the human condition? What does the God of the Cross expect from us when we cry out in our suffering? Did we come to church today to be informed or transformed? Are we seeking information from God or rather transformation through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior? In our reading of the Holy Scriptures we are informed with words of revelation, far-reaching words of the prophets, and the precious instructions given to us by the once-and-for-all (of us) and once-and-for-all-time incarnation in Jesus. The boundless grace and love of God is made known to us through Jesus, what a wondrous portal, be it only glimpse, of that which our Creator provides to us, every day-come what may. Similarly, we must keep deeply within our hearts, minds, and souls the knowledge that Almighty God is utterly transcendent. When we ask why bad things happen to good people or why bad times (like now) befall good people, it is understandable for us to cry out from our suffering, not to be informed, but

to be transformed. That we all have endured suffering in our lives, yet find our way to worship a gracious loving God in Jesus today speaks volumes about our faith in God.

But what about our faith in God?, let us delve more deeply. This is where we begin to understand the message of Jesus was not just to inform, but to go way beyond simple information, to transformation made possible by our faith in God. Transforming our lives is what our Christian faith is all about. Transforming our lives and the lives about us (family, neighbors, friends, and the "other") towards the promise of redemption and eternal life in the body of Christ is our covenant with God. Information allows us to know, but transformation allows us to grow, spiritually strong so that we can cry out to God, as a child of God; cry out to God as one made strong in faith through adversity; cry out to God, as one who seeks with open heart not only information, but transformation

When we cry out to God, we invite God's presence in our everyday, imperfect lives. When we cry out to God, we embrace rather than resist God's presence in our lives. When we cry out to God, we welcome transformation in our lives through embracing Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. On Ash Wednesday I gave service at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in the City. It is a one of

the world's best centers dedicated solely to the diagnosis and treatment of cancer, so it has many very sick patients. Many cancer patients and their families came to the Rockefeller Chapel for ashes on that Wednesday and for words of comfort. A young mother in her mid twenties told me that her husband was so very sick and could we pray to God in his behalf. As we prayed for her husband I felt her strength being restored. What faith she demonstrated in such a dire situation. I was asked to go up on the wards to visit patients too sick to visit the chapel. One Irish fellow in his eighties asked me first if I was a priest? I said "no, but a child of God like yourself and a lay preacher of a Congregational Church on Long Island and 2nd year seminary student...". He said that I would "do", jokingly, smiling through eyes made weak with chemotherapy. We prayed together, chatted, and the Spirit came to his eyes and his demeanor. I gave him ashes and he said to me as I departed "well, see you next year" and I turned and said "yes, the good Lord willing" and he winked at me and we left sharing a smile. All of us can be *transformed* as well as *transforming* daily by small acts of kindness as we venture forth. As we approach Easter, let us think about how we can transform each others' lives through the love of Jesus and the power of God . Here let us return to John 3:16 to examine why Jesus was sent to dwell among us and to become the God on the Cross who redeems us.

¹⁶"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,

that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world

through him.

¹⁸Whoever believes in him is not condemned,

but whoever does not believe stands condemned already

because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

Thus we can appreciate John 3:16 and its rich content. Transformation is why God sent Jesus to dwell among us. We have two responsibilities that are uniquely a part of calling out to God in pain and suffering as we seek relief and transformation: to embrace the transformative content of the message of Jesus and of the Scriptures to change us; and, to embrace our role as Christians in transforming the lives of our fellow human beings.

In closing, let us make use of a "litany" to help us focus on *information* versus *transformation*.

Life *informs* about sadness and despair, but Jesus enables us to *transform* ourselves by the grace of God;

Life *informs* about transgressions and sin, but Jesus

enables us to *transform* ourselves by redemption in Him;

Life *informs* about separation and anxiety, but Jesus enables us to *transform* ourselves by loving each other;

Life *informs* about sickness and disease, but Jesus enables us to *transform* ourselves by faith in the Kingdom of God;

Life *informs* about suffering within our psyche, but Jesus enables us to *transform* ourselves by nourishing our souls;

Life *informs* about dying and death, but Jesus, the God on the Cross, enables us to *transform* ourselves by eternal life unto Him.

Finally, the God of the Cross enters death, to negate death and so *transforms* our fallen lives with the grace of God. As we are in our Easter season, let us both *transform* and *be transformed* by our Lord and Savior, Christ Jesus.

Let us pray,

Oh Gracious God, how often we turn our faces from you, how often are we resistant to thy boundless grace and to the redemptive love of Jesus Christ, your only Son, the most perfect gift of grace transforming our fallen state. We worship Thee Almighty God and ask for forgiveness of our sins and forgiveness for our resistance to Thee. As we trudge along the often difficult and demanding road of life, hear our cries of suffering and of sorrow, give us hope, relief, and the strongest of

faith. We cry out to Thee comforted by the knowledge that we are your blessed children, whose lives can be transformed by Thy Word and made right through our life in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. **Amen**