

**A Sermon Preached by Rev. Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on March 7, 2021.**

### **IS SUFFERING REFINEMENT?**

***See, I have refined you, but not like silver; I have tested you in the furnace of adversity.*** Isaiah 48:10

One of the purposes of the season of Lent is to ponder the meaning of Jesus' Passion. We recall how Jesus suffered on our behalf. During this Lenten season we are exploring questions concerning the meaning of suffering. Two weeks ago, our question was "Is suffering punishment?" Jesus tells us "**For He makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.**" Jesus is reminding us that the natural world is not ordered to bless those who are good and punish those who are bad. The good suffer and prosper along with the bad. Jesus teaches the clear truth that Christianity does not promise to save us from all suffering.

I also shared with you the words of Simone Weil **the extreme greatness of Christianity lies in the fact that it does not seek a supernatural remedy for suffering, but a supernatural use for it.**

During the rest of the season of Lent we will explore what might be the supernatural uses for suffering. One possible way that God uses suffering is as a process of refinement.

In our Gospel lesson for today we heard about the strange figure of John the Baptist. John is that ascetic cousin of Jesus who had an unusual wardrobe and diet. John comes from the desert preaching a strong message in very unsettling images. One of those difficult images is John saying that Jesus was coming to baptize with fire.

John calls on people to repent and be baptized. John says he will baptize with water. Water is able to cleanse the outside of a person, but Jesus will baptize with water and fire. This fire causes inner transformation.

The picture of Jesus coming to baptize with fire like an avenging judge seemed to me like something out of a comic book. Most of the time for us fire symbolizes destruction. Thus, when we read or hear this passage it can frighten us with its destructive power. This is not what fire symbolizes in this passage. Fire not only destroys; it can also refine. Many metals are made pure by fire. The fire helps to remove that which is impure. It burns off the debased metal leaving the pure behind. The fire of Jesus' love can radically transform us. The love of Christ can work fundamental change in our lives. Jesus can make us better people.

So, in some cases, suffering can be experienced as part of a process of refinement. Isaiah tells us **See, I have refined you, but not like silver; I have tested you in the furnace of adversity.**

That is all well and good to say, but how does it work in our everyday lives? How does this refining process take place?

Franklin Roosevelt was born in 1882 into a very privileged family. He was an only child of his mother Sara who was more than twenty years younger than his Father. He was home schooled until he was sent to prep school at Groton. Every summer from the age of two, his parents would take him on a trip to Europe. His father died when Franklin was 18.

When he completed Groton, Franklin was enrolled at Harvard. His mother temporarily moved to Cambridge to be near her son. He had many avocations of the children of privilege. Roosevelt learned to ride, shoot, row, and to play polo and lawn tennis. He took up golf in his teen years, becoming a skilled long hitter. He learned to sail early, and when he was 16, his father gave him a sailboat.

When he graduated from school, he passed the bar and joined a New York Law firm. He married his distant cousin, Eleanor, who was given away by her Uncle Theodore who happened to be President of the United States. They began a family which grew to six children. He was inspired by his distant cousin Teddy to enter politics. His cousin Teddy did not have a very high opinion of the coddled young man Franklin. He did not expect much of him.

No one will ever know the name of the boy scout who changed the world. Odds are even he never knew he had so great an impact on history. It's a certainty that he was carrying the poliovirus—but he may not have known that either since only one in every 200 infected people ever comes down with the paralytic disease. And it's a certainty too that he had it in late July of 1921 when he and a raucous gathering of other scouts had gathered on Bear Mountain in New York for a summer jamboree. So important was the event in the scouting world that it even attracted a visit by the former Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Franklin Roosevelt.

This much is painfully certain too: somehow, the virus that inhabited the boy found its way to the man, settling first in his mucus membranes, and later in his gut and lymph system, where it multiplied explosively, finally migrating to the anterior horn cells of his spinal cord. On the evening of August 10, a feverish Roosevelt climbed into bed in his summer cottage on Campobello Island in Canada's Bay of Fundy. It was the last time he would ever stand unassisted again.

The illness caused him to withdraw from public life. Roosevelt entered a long period of physical rehabilitation. By December 1921, he was ready to have a physical therapist begin to massage his muscles, begin to work his muscles, begin to try to figure out exactly the extent of the damage. As more and more time passed in the coming weeks and the early months of 1922, he was able to begin to exercise on his own. This was laborious, difficult: He really could not even stand up on his own at all for months and months, and so this was a matter of lying in his bed, performing these minute little exercises, trying to move one muscle and then another muscle...it was painstaking, it was difficult. He had to have his legs put into casts at one point to prevent against contractures....it was really a grueling process.

After years of adapting to his limitations, Franklin slowly made his way back into public life. But there was a change in him. James Tobin, an author of a book about Roosevelt was asked in an interview how this time of suffering affected him. Tobin replied:

**Certainly, people close to him said it tempered him. Eleanor herself said it made him stronger and more courageous.**

**That doesn't quite make sense to me. I think people have those innate capacities or they don't. The crisis draws it out of them. It allows them to see who they really are. And that's why I chose the title *The Man He Became*. I think he was that man before he became sick, but he only discovered who he really was through the ordeal of polio. So, it gave him a kind of confidence in his own strength that perhaps no one can have until you're tested.**

**I also think it inevitably gave him a kind of passion for people who are suffering that he couldn't have had if he had not deeply suffered himself. That capacity was perfectly timed for the country's problems in the Great Depression.**

The suffering that Roosevelt endured refined him and made him a leader who could stand up to the challenges of the depression and war. As George Will once said, 'When the steel went to his legs it also went into his spine.'

Suffering made Roosevelt stronger.

Joni Eareckson Tada was born in 1949 in Baltimore, Maryland, the youngest of four daughters. Her parents were named John and Lindy Eareckson. Joni was named for her father, John Eareckson, so her name is pronounced like "Johnny". Her father participated in the 1932 Olympics as an alternate for the United States wrestling team and was honored as a Distinguished Member of the National Wrestling Hall of Fame and Museum in 1996.

With the example of her parents, Joni lived a very active life all through her growing up years. She enjoyed riding horses, hiking, tennis, and swimming. On July 30, 1967, at the age of 18 she dove into the Chesapeake Bay after misjudging the shallowness of the water. She suffered a fracture between the fourth and fifth cervical levels and became a quadriplegic, paralyzed from the shoulders down.

During Joni's two years of rehabilitation, according to her autobiography, she experienced anger, depression, suicidal thoughts, and religious doubts. However, during occupational therapy, she learned to paint with a brush between her teeth and began selling her artwork. She also writes this way, although for most writing tasks she relies on voice recognition software. Over the last fifty-four years she married, wrote over forty books, recorded several musical albums, starred in an autobiographical movie of her life, and is an advocate for people with disabilities.

She came to see her suffering as redemptive. She once wrote:

**“My wheelchair was the key to seeing all this happen—especially since God’s power always shows up best in weakness. So here I sit ... glad that I have not been healed on the outside, but glad that I have been healed on the inside. Healed from my own self-centered wants and wishes.”**

The refining fire of suffering can help us rely on a power higher than ourselves. We can do more when we rely on God.

One of Grimm’s Fairy Tales includes the tale of a competition between a huge giant and a small tailor to prove who is the strongest. The giant took a stone and threw it into the air. He threw it so high that it took a long, long time before it came down to earth. The diminutive tailor then stepped forward. He moved his arm forward and released a bird. The bird flew away and did not come down at all.

Christians understand that those who strive to become better people merely under their own strength are like the giant. We may be able to make great improvement in our behavior and character, but, like the stone thrown by the giant, we are bound to earth. The power of the tailor comes from another source. His strength comes from outside himself. I believe this simple story teaches us that it is only through the power of God that radical transformation is possible.

This tale illustrates the same point that John the Baptist makes in our Gospel Lesson. John tells us that there is a difference between the change that human beings can bring in their own lives and the radical change that Jesus can bring. John says that while he baptizes with water, Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

If we think we are going to radically change ourselves by human effort we are mistaken. We can make marginal changes in our lives, but real fundamental change comes not from our own power, but rather from the love of Christ. One of the ways we experience the fire of God’s love is through suffering, suffering which can refine us. So, when suffering comes in the pain of the experience may we look for ways that God might be using the experience to perfect us.

***See, I have refined you, but not like silver; I have tested you in the furnace of adversity.***