Psalm 69:20-21; Passion Reading: Luke 23:1-25 March 9, 2016

Once, many years ago, I was visiting a woman in a hospital. She was experiencing terrible pain. She held a button in her hand. She explained that when she pushed the button, a tiny dose of morphine was administered to her I.V. to help manage the pain. To me it seemed a method perfectly designed to create drug addiction. My ignorance was proven when I then learned that people in her situation actually feel less pain *and* use less morphine than people who have morphine prescribed by a doctor. How could that be? It is all about control and choice, even for people—or maybe especially for people—in moments of suffering.

So, thinking of choices in suffering, would it be worse to suffer from false friends who abandon you, or to suffer at the hands of enemies who are intent on making you suffer? I suppose it depends on your temperment, but this is not a choice I like.

In the second lenten service, we heard Psalm 41’s prophecy of betrayal and denial. God had said that in the Suffering Servant’s last hours, even his closest friends would betray him. It happened to Jesus. It happens to us too.

There is the spouse who simply up and vanishes when the terminal illness diagnosis comes back. Or I can think of an aged man whose children had all died and no close family remained, and he had probably burned a few bridges as well, and then was dependant on hand-outs from neighbors. Oh, the despair. To journey a road alone in good times is lonely. To journey a road alone in bad times is crushing.

This evening’s psalm, Psalm 69, says that the Suffering Servant of the Lord would suffer even worse than abandonment by friends. What could be worse? Listen to Psalm 69.

The psalm began, *“Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold”* (1) Do you feel yourself sinking into the cold, thick quicksand, quicksand patient enough to swallow you slowly.

But it is not mere quicksand. Our reading says, ***“All my enemies are before you…Scorn has broken my heart… I looked forsympathy, but there was none… They put gall in my food, and gave me vinegar for my thirst.”*** His heart is broken not because of false friends, but fiendish enemies. These are the sort of people whose greatest mercy can be to end your life, rather than prolong it with suffering.

We aren’t talking about people who up and walk out. Psalm 69 is about people who won’t go away even when you wish they would. How terrible to look, not into the eyes of a helpless but concerned friend, but to instead to look into the eyes of a sadist who wants to inflict further pain. Imagine being surrounded by your enemies, and now a crowd of them feeding off pack mentality. Oh, and we thought that being abandoned was the worst that could happen!

I imagine (and I can only imagine, because I have never experienced it) I imagine it is a little like being a prisoner of war. How terrible and hopeless that must feel! And yet, most prisoners of war (though not all) have had the comeraderie of fellow POWs. The worst of the worst is to be wrested from that group of fellow sufferers and brought before your tormentors alone.

In Jesus’ pain and suffering he looked around, and did not see indifferent people, people whom he could at least count on to walk by and ignore him. He saw his actual and active enemies. Not content to walk by him in his suffering, they gave him a kick, and they laughed. Not content to let him die, they gawked. Not content to hear his laboring lungs, they mocked him who was nailed to a post and said, “Oh, big scary Son of God, why don’t you come down now!” He was surrounded by soldiers whose orders it was to make sure that he died, and painfully.

So, would it be worse to suffer from false friends who abandon you, or to suffer at the hands of enemies who are intent on making you suffer? I suppose it depends on your temperment, but it is not a choice I like.

But I know this, Jesus suffered both, for us.

I have never seen that movie, “The Passion of the Christ.” It was a 2004 movie portraying Jesus’ death in excruciating detail and gore. I never intend to see it either. I am not making a judgment on anyone. I am simply saying that it would be too much for me to bear. To see the violence and shame meted out to Jesus, my Savior, with no sympathy, it would be too much. I will read the written account and mourn over that.

How great this pain is that Jesus suffered! It was so great that Jesus prayed that this hour would pass before him. He prayed that he wouldn’t have to suffer it. Yet he did for us. Jesus could bear it, but then he was the Son of God.

There is another man in Jesus’ last moments who was utterly abandoned. This shadowy figure who flits through the account of Jesus’ suffering and death was named Judas. If you have ever been through the Lenten cycle, the two things you know about Judas are that he betrayed Jesus, and that he killed himself.

There is one other thing about Judas that perhaps you know. It is recorded in Matthew 27:3-5. It says, *“When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. ‘I have sinned,’ he said, ‘for I have betrayed innocent blood.’ ‘What is that to us?’ they replied. ‘That’s your responsibility.’ So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.”*  Judas knew what it was to be in abject despair, to look in the faces of those around him and to see only scorn and abuse. They couldn’t care less. It crushed Judas.

One cannot help but ask one of those “what-if” questions: What if Israel’s chief priests and elders, Israel’s spiritual shepherds, had done their duty and consoled this lost sheep of Israel, what if they had assured Judas of God’s forgiveness even for horrible sins and crimes, what might have become of Judas? Of course, it is a question we cannot answer, and it is a past we cannot change. But I ask it for a reason. There are people we know who have suffered this abandonment. There are people in despair even as we sit in this church building, who still have life, for whom there is still hope. Maybe you know one or two of them. And while we cannot lessen Jesus’ suffering on the cross at the hand of his enemies, inspired by him we can relieve the suffering of our fellow man. Speak to them of God’s acceptance in spite of the world’s rejection. Tell them of divine forgiveness even when people say they can never forgive. Let them know of a Savior who suffered both at the hands of friends and enemies.

Jesus, while there was noone there to look with pity upon him, he did have one comfort. His comfort was knowing that his suffering in this cruel, inhuman way would ensure our life, eternal life. That was his comfort. That was what made him *“set his face like flint.”* [as we heard last Wednesday]

Jesus had to suffer like that. Sadly, he had to. He had to suffer for my sins, for yours. But no one else *has* to. Knowing what our Savior has done for us, let us be the sympathetic face to those in suffering. Let us be the ones who bring assurance to them of God’s forgiveness, strength and eternal hope, even when there is none in this world. Let such sufferers know their value to God, and to us God’s people.

Jesus had no choice in his pain. He had to suffer both from false friends and fiendish enemies. But his suffering is our freedom. Amen.