

Blessed be the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Everyone seated here today knows about suffering. Somewhere in your life, or the life of a loved one, you have witnessed pain or loss, diminishment, incapacitation, inability, disability, diagnosis, mental anguish, or shame.

No one gets out of it. Suffering is as natural to the human predicament as is breathing or dying.

It's difficult to discuss suffering without stringing together a bunch of clichés, or without sounding dismissive of someone's pain.

And yet, suffering and pain are what I want us to talk about today, so I am begging your forgiveness in advance if I stray into the territory of "pat answers." I am hoping that together we can forge a way through such a conversation that produces something of value for the future.

But first, I want to share a story about a man you may not have heard much about:

Thomas A. Dorsey was born the son of a minister in the Southern part of the United States, but he did not take to the religious life very well. Early on he realized that he had gifts for writing the blues and fled his Southern home for the prohibition-era honky-tonks in Chicago.

Soon he became a celebrity songwriter, hired by the biggest pop music companies to write the blues for them. Many considered the

stuff he wrote to be garbage—tasteless, raunchy, offensive music—and yet his songs were in high demand in the speak-easies, and he was making a fortune.

Thomas A. Dorsey had the world by tail, making money hand over fist, a recognized celebrity and man about town, with a beautiful young wife. Like the proverbial man falling off a tall building, you could almost hear him saying, as he passed the tenth floor: “All right so far.”

Then tragedy struck. His young wife died in childbirth with their first child, and the child died soon thereafter.

Dorsey’s life came crashing down around him. In the midst of the storm, he found he had no port. He thrashed about for awhile—and then remembered something he’d been taught a long time before. About a God who was there in the worst of times. A God who said, “I will never leave you or forsake you.”

In his despair, Dorsey wrote a new song, a different kind of song from his previous speak-easy favorites: “Precious Lord, Take My Hand.” Maybe you know it. It goes like this.

*Precious Lord take my hand, lead me on, let me stand, I am tired, I am weak, I am worn; through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light, take my hand precious Lord, lead me on.*

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“By your endurance you will gain your souls.” With these words Jesus concludes his lengthy remarks about the Temple, his

prediction that it will be thrown down, and some examples—at the request of some listeners—of signs that this unthinkable destruction is about to occur.

To put all of this into a bit of context, let's remember that Jesus is now in Jerusalem where he has caused quite a stir. Leading up to our passage for today, Jesus has cleansed the Temple, done some teaching, answered hostile questioners, offered up the Parable of the Wicked Tenants that suggests he will die at the hands of those who maintain the Temple and that the stone the builders rejected will become the cornerstone, denounced the respected class of scribes and, immediately before our passage today begins, commends the generosity of a widow whose small offering, he says, is greater than what the others put in because they “contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.”

Then we move to the discussion of the Temple in which some people speak highly of its beauty and its glorification of God, for to them the Temple was where God was present on earth. There were many synagogues, places of worship and teaching, but only one Temple. To say it was the centerpiece of faith for the people of Israel would be to drastically understate its importance and value.

And then Jesus says it will all be thrown down.

Astonishment. When will this be? What are the signs?

Jesus then offers up a litany of terror, unspeakable human violence, natural disasters of epic proportion. Plus, for his followers, predictions of captivity, horror and death.

And yet, in and among these terrifying remarks, he gives a glimmer of hope to his followers: these tragic circumstances will give you a chance to testify and I will give you the words to say, and not a hair of your head will perish.

*“By your endurance you will gain your souls.”*

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Jesus’ predictions are made in very particular historical circumstances, for the people who were to be in the midst of those circumstances. Therefore, at the time Luke was writing his Gospel, much of what Jesus predicts in the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter had already come to pass.

For Luke’s audience, for us, knowing that the Temple had already fallen, Jerusalem itself besieged and laid low, that early disciples were arrested and killed, knowing all these things authenticates Jesus’ words and serves notice on us, too, that earthly things are transitory, that believing brings risks, and that suffering and pain are a part of the deal.

But Jesus also makes a promise: *“By your endurance you will gain your souls.”*

I posted a question on our Facebook page this week: What does endurance mean? Is it just about “lasting” long enough for the tough stuff to move on?

Since then I've developed a couple of other questions: Is endurance about surviving? Or is it about thriving?

I checked a couple of dictionaries for help, and they did not completely satisfy me. Here's one definition: "The act, quality, or power of withstanding hardship or stress." Here's another, "Endurance is the power to withstand something challenging."

Even though they are not completely satisfying, both of these definitions include yet another word of interest, one I believe may offer some direction. The word is "withstand." Endurance is the ability to withstand something challenging, a hardship, or stress.

Where do we get our power to withstand? When suffering and pain come our way, by what means can we endure it?

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We all know people who try a variety of ways to get through pain and suffering, but some of the ways they choose don't lend themselves to life, to depth, to endurance. Some of the solutions, while perhaps pleasant enough in the moment, are not solutions at all.

I had a friend who truly thought "retail therapy" could solve anything. "Get your mind off it, sweetie. Go shopping with me."

You may know people who self-medicate with alcohol or drugs.  
Or people who throw themselves into their work.  
Or those who withdraw behind the invisible curtain of depression.

Yes, there are many ways to deal with suffering and pain, but not all of them lead to life, to endurance.

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In the face of especially large-scale tragedies such as the recent typhoon in the Philippines, we see how sadly inadequate are a number of our typical attempts to outrun suffering. You can't shop enough, drink enough, work enough to get that one behind you.

To be honest, even to speak of our faith in the midst of such devastation might seem overly glib when trying to console someone who just lost their whole family, their whole community, their sources of food and safe water, their future.

Trust God. Pray. Believe. Keep the faith. Important and true, but not always the most comforting or pastoral responses in times of immeasurable need.

So what can we say to others, what can we say to ourselves in such times?

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Maybe such occasions are not the time for *speaking* words of faith. Maybe endurance is cultivated best in the doing of faith. Instead of telling someone to trust God, we can trust God for them when their world is out of control. Maybe instead of telling someone to pray, we can pray for them when they are standing in the midst of loss. We can believe on their behalf. Keep the faith on their behalf. Until they are able to do so for themselves again.

Evelyn Underhill, the great English explorer of Christian mysticism, said, “No Christian escapes a taste of the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land.”

Every hardship, every form of suffering, every bit of pain in our lives is the ground on which temptation stands to distract from our faith, from “withstanding,” from enduring.

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Where shall we turn for our support? To whom shall we go for strength? There’s only one “where” and one “whom” that offer sustaining help over time. We might not immediately recall that in the midst of tragic loss or grievous pain. We might cry and rail and shriek and pound. But I believe God understands the desperation of human grief. I believe God understands the actions and words of a broken heart. We are not perfect.

So it is in these times that others can trust and pray and believe and keep the faith on our behalf. It is in these times that God stands beside us and behind us, ever patient, always ready, forever loving. We *endure* because we are not alone and because the One from whom all blessings flow, is eternally available.

When the time is right, when we can catch our breath, God stands ready, arms open always, ready to listen, to hear, to accompany, to help.

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*“By your endurance you will gain your souls.”* Jesus did not promise an easy life, but he did promise a triumphant life. Julian of Norwich, an early Christian mystic, put it this way:

“God hath NOT said, ‘Thou shalt not be tempested,  
thou shalt not be travailed,  
thou shalt not be afflicted,’  
but God DID say, ‘Thou shalt not be overcome.’”

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Thomas A Dorsey knew about enduring.

The seeds of it were planted in his early life and did not bear fruit until tested by personal adversity. But bear fruit they did.

“Precious Lord, Take My Hand” was Martin Luther King Jr.’s favorite song. And while the song is powerful testimony to one man’s trust in God, it was not a commercial success.

Dorsey’s old pop music companies would have nothing to do with him. So he launched out on his own and devoted the rest of his life writing a new genre of Christian music fused with the blues that would become known as “Gospel Music.”

*“By your endurance you will gain your souls.”*

Amen.