

Today, along with most of the rest of the Christian community, we begin a holy time, a ritual that is almost as old as Christianity itself. We enter into the final week of preparation for our yearly celebration of our Lord's death and resurrection. And of course, we begin with the passion...

We proclaim that particular story today in the midst of our community because the story of Jesus' suffering and death is a place where all our stories of pain and loss and suffering and death during the year can find some meaning. We do that because we are confronted each and every day with tragedies of human suffering that seem to challenge the truth of God's providential care for us.

In short we bring all our tragedies and hurts and cares to Jesus. And where else can we bring them and make sense of them except in Jesus? And where else in Jesus, except the passion?

When we proclaim the incarnation -- when we talk about the fact that in Christ, God was among us and lived with us - that in Christ, God died like we died -- that in Christ, God was a part of human life in its every detail, pain, suffering, death, humiliation... What better place to bring our tragedies than to a God who has been there and understands?

It makes perfect sense:

Whenever we encounter death, defeat, loss, or any tragedy, we seek first, the one who has already been there. The first person each of us wants to be with when we have been hurt, is one who has been hurt in the same way. The alcoholic is drawn to Alcoholics Anonymous ---

When we've suffered any kind of illness, it's comforting to talk to one who has been through that, that's what support groups are all about --- The person who has recently been divorced does not rush home to celebrate her sister's twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, but would rather be with someone who has known the recent and painful death of a marriage. --- When we've been fired from a job, we seek first and sometimes only, the friend who has also known such failure or tragedy... There is new and unknown strength in being bound to another who knows what it means to be wounded, just as I have been wounded.

And Jesus is that person that we all seek...

When we sit in the darkness of the valley of the shadow of death, we want to sit with one who is acquainted with darkness, because talk is cheap and there are many who don't know what it means to be in our particular kind of darkness. We want to be with one who will lighten that darkness with a special understanding.

Jesus is that one...

When we look at the passion of our Lord, we see it all: the worst man has to offer, the worst the world has to offer: fear, misunderstanding, denial, humiliation, cruelty, death -- tragedy beyond all depths to describe. But there is another side of that too... Love, service, and the

glory that comes from emptying one's self and becoming a servant for the sake of the world... We see a love, -- again beyond all depths to describe -- poured out for each of us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

And maybe that's why it's so important to bring our sorrows and tragedies and even our triumphs to the one who knows us and knows the pain of being a part of this world so well, and who loves us beyond all measure --- to draw comfort and strength from that love...

Today's Bible lessons don't ask us to choose suffering as suffering, but they do challenge us to enter into Jesus' struggle to accept, in faith, the reality of suffering in human life. Jesus' agony in the garden and his sense of abandonment by God on the cross reflect our own human experience.

Paul says in Philippians that our attitude must be that of Christ who empties himself by obediently accepting death on a cross. Jesus' obedient acceptance is not a passive surrender in the face of suffering but an active and faith filled response to his own role in God's plan of salvation.

Such listening obedience doesn't remove the human agony or the feeling of abandonment that are a part of our experience of suffering. But by participating in Christ's obedience unto death, we ourselves are opened to the mystery and paradox of God's loving us all the way through suffering and death and on into newness of life.

So as we gather this Passion Sunday around the word of God's gift of new life in Christ, crucified and risen, we bring the mystery of our own experience of the passion as individuals, as members of a Christian community, as members of the entire human family. We bring suffering and tragedy that makes no sense to us, and we bring our own questions about where this loving God is when we are surrounded by pain and loss.

Today's lessons assure us that through self-emptying, our loving God is with us: In, with, and through Christ, God is present so that we can have life and have it abundantly.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN