

The Fine Print
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Mar. 4, 2012 Lent II

Psalm 22
Mark 8:31-38

Today's passages highlight and anticipate Jesus' suffering. They give us a foretaste of the end of his Lenten journey. They're sort of like the fine print in our covenant with God. Our contract leads with "Promised Land!" "Milk and Honey!" "New Creation!" "Healing and Hope!" But then there is an ultra-small print footnote that says, "Side effects may include suffering, affliction, rejection, poverty and, in rare cases, crucifixion."

The "problem of pain" is an age-old one for theologians. Why must the Son of God suffer? What does it mean for us? How are we to understand our own suffering?

To delve into this I want to further explore something Cindy noted last week — she said she revised her understanding of a middle-class Jesus going out to serve the poor and replaced that with a realization that Jesus was himself poor. I want to take that thought a few steps further. In our traditional imaginations an almighty, all-powerful cosmic King did something very surprising and placed Jesus in the most unnatural setting possible, among the poor of the Earth in order to save them. But what if we understand the incarnation among the poor not as Jesus stooping to those most in need of rescue, but rather as Jesus living among those whom God already knew best — where God's mission was in effect before the incarnation? What if God did not deign to be poor, but had a natural affinity with the poor? What if Jesus came to the poor not to save them, but because the poor are key to the redemption of the Earth? Maybe it

wasn't only Jesus who was poor. Perhaps we need to understand God the Creator as poor also.

We are taught that it would be natural for Christ to be a king. Let's allow the logic that Jesus' incarnation should fit God's character. But assume that God really did do what was most natural and logical in Christ being born poor. What if his poverty is a not a contradiction, not contrary to God's nature, but rather a revelation of God's identity? Should we speak not of a God "of" the poor, but of a God who is poor? What would this do to our value judgments about wealth and poverty?

If God became poor to make the poor like the wealthy, then Jesus' mission was a failure. The poor, as he said, will always be with us. But if Jesus was poor because God is poor, and if poverty and powerlessness reveal God's character, well, guess what: much of traditional western theology just flew out the window.

African-American theologian J. Kameron Carter writes, "Having taken on the form of poverty and the form of the slave, God in Christ is the impoverished slave. As such, God enters into the hurts of those who suffer so that from inside those hurts, being fully identified with them, he heals them. It is the poor slave, one might say, who is closest to God and so reveals God."¹

It is worth noting that Carter writes from a male perspective. Many black womanist theologians chafe at assertions that we should identify with Jesus' servitude. That understandable critique leads us to our next question: how does the idea of God's poverty inform our living? I, for one, do not believe that most of us are called to

¹ J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account*, Oxford University Press, 2008, quoted in Jonathan Tran, "The New Black Theology," *The Christian Century*, February 8, 2012, 26.

voluntary poverty — though perhaps if you have never experienced poverty, it is worth a shot. Those who have been poor, however, are rightly not inclined to go back.

Everything that made God the creator of the universe, omnipotent, omniscient and all the other omnis, is present in the poor and suffering servant, Jesus Christ. Christ is the means by which God redeems humanity. Humanity redeemed (and perhaps, particularly the poor) is the means by which God redeems the world. Jesus' incarnation into suffering and poverty fully reveal God's character. And so what do we learn of Jesus' mission and God's intent for the world?

We can gain further perspective on this question by looking at some of my favorite passages — the Magnificat, where Mary sings of the poor being lifted up and the rulers brought down, and Jesus' sermon from the book of Isaiah, where he proclaims the year of God's favor, healing and release for the captive. Both are foreshadowed in Psalm 22, parts of which we heard read. The Psalm begins with this devastating lament — "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This is the song that Jesus chose to sing from the cross. Note that the quotation recorded in the gospels is probably a short-hand to indicate that he recited the entire Psalm — and given that it was a Psalm, he would not have simply spoken it, but he would have sung or chanted it. Imagine his gasping breath reaching these words: "For God did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him," and "The poor shall eat and be satisfied."

He sings not that God will make the poor rich (and vice versa), but that the poor will eat and be satisfied. Jesus does not glorify the symptoms of poverty — the suffering

and the hunger — he prays for their alleviation and anticipates their end. He lives within them and in doing so brings about our redemption.

Our covenant with God does not promise us release from poverty and suffering, but is rather an agreement to walk with us through our suffering; to be incarnate alongside of us, not as a superhero who swoops in from the heavens to pull us out, but as a fellow sufferer — as one who knows and understands our experience because he is one of us. But the covenant is also a covenant of enough — of satisfaction, of the promise of redemption. Our role in this covenant is not to seek poverty, but to seek an end to poverty. Not to seek hunger, but to seek an end to hunger. Not to seek suffering, but to alleviate suffering and walk with those who suffer. Over and over again in the first Testament, God's promises to us are conditioned upon our work of justice and mercy. And as I said earlier, Jesus saw his mission as ending suffering. Suffering and poverty are sometimes side-effects of faithfulness to the covenant, but it is also our responsibility to heal that suffering, sometimes even from the midst of it, as Jesus did.

Though I don't think we should strive to become poor, we should learn to understand the world through the lens of poverty — to learn definitions of "enough" not based on wealth, extravagance and feasting, but based on satisfaction. To see abundance not as having everything we want, but as having what we need. This is also how God provides for the world. There is not enough for everyone to be rich and gluttonous, but there is enough for everyone to be satisfied.