

Christ Is Alive!
1 Peter 4: 12-14; 5: 6-11
Ann Hatfield

I have a lot of books. I was going to say, I have TOO MANY books. But honestly, is it even possible to HAVE too many books???

Over the years, I have adopted large boxes of books covering topics like Christian theology, evangelism, preaching, and pastoral care. Retiring pastors have donated most of these resources, and SOMEHOW, they worm their way into my already overstuffed bookshelves. Perhaps the question I often ask myself holds some truth: “Ann, have you ever met a book you didn’t like?”

As I was researching today’s lesson, I picked up one of these inherited books: *The Problem of Pain* by C.S. Lewis. Not surprisingly, I own more than a few books by this renowned Christian author and theologian. Although I immensely enjoy Lewis’s writings, I had never read this particular book.

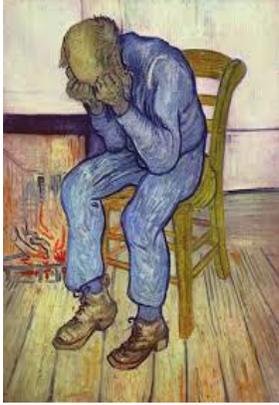
C.S. Lewis spent the first 30 years of his life as an atheist, before converting to Christianity in 1931. So, he begins the introduction to *The Problem of Pain* by sharing this recollection:

Not many years ago when I was an atheist, if anyone had asked me, “Why do you not believe in God?” my reply would have run something like this: “Look at the universe we live in . . . The creatures cause pain by being born, and live by inflicting pain, and in pain they mostly die.”¹

Of course, atheists are not the only people who wrestle with this issue. The problem of pain is a concern for Christians, as well.

Understandably, the problem of pain can challenge our faith. Like C.S. Lewis, we look at the world, and we often see pain all around us. So, we wonder: *If God is all good, and God is all powerful, why is there pain and evil in the world?*

Theologically speaking, this is the question of “Theodicy.” In other words, how do we proclaim God’s justice and goodness in the face of human pain and suffering? The problem of pain gives rise to questions: “God, are you there?” “**Why** is this happening?” “**How long**, O Lord, will this go on?” Amid so many questions and so much uncertainty, we may struggle with despair and discouragement.



One of my favorite artists is Vincent Van Gogh.

In this painting of a man bent over, his fists clenched and his face hidden, he appears utterly defeated. I imagine many of us feel similar emotions these days: disappointment, pain, and sorrow. We also wonder: “Where are you, God?” “How long, O Lord?”

In response to a community wrestling with similar questions, the author of 1 Peter sent a letter of encouragement with words of hope. In the first century, the early Christians suffered because their way of life stood in stark opposition to the Roman culture in which they lived. They refused to worship Roman gods, participate in temple rites, or pledge allegiance to the emperor by honoring him as a god. Therefore, they faced public ridicule, imprisonment, beatings, and even crucifixion.

Addressing their difficult situation, the message in 1 Peter offers hope and meaning. In the midst of their pain and suffering, they are assured the outcome lies in the hands of a loving God. The author reminds them, God **IS** all good, **AND** God **IS** all powerful. God is both.

This morning’s opening hymn “*Christ is Alive!*” was written for Easter Sunday in 1968. Just ten days earlier, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated. The text was written to express the good news of resurrection hope – even in the shadow of this terrible act of violence and tragic death.

The hymn affirms the presence of a wounded, risen Christ with all who suffer.² It is a reminder we are not alone in our suffering. God is present in our pain, and God suffers with us. This is made known in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor explains the significance of this; she writes:

Christianity is the only world religion that confesses a God who suffers. It is not all that popular an idea, even among Christians. We prefer a God who prevents suffering, only that is not the God we have got. What the cross teaches us is that God’s power is not the power to force human choices and end human pain. It is, instead, the power to pick up the shattered pieces and make something holy out of them – not from a distance but right close up . . . That is the power of a suffering God, not to prevent pain but to redeem it, by going through it with us.³

God does not always prevent pain, but God does go through it with us.

Author Isak (ee-sahk) Dinesen asserts, “All sorrows can be borne, if you put them into a story or tell a story about them.” So far, I have told you **only part** of the story about this Van Gogh painting.



Bent over, with his head in his hands, the man indeed appears broken and consumed by grief. Certainly, this masterpiece would convey an image of total despair had it not been for one thing: Van Gogh named the painting *At Eternity's Gate*.

Writing about this work of art, theologian Kathleen Powers Erickson notes that belief in God is central to this image. For Erickson, the painting's title demonstrates that even in his deepest moments of sorrow and pain, Van Gogh clung to his faith in God.

What appeared at first to be a man defeated by life is really a man praying at the gate of eternity for God's sustaining and comforting presence. This is not a man broken by despair; but rather a child of God in conversation with our Heavenly Father. It is not a picture of hope-LESS-ness, but hope-FUL-ness. It is an image of hope and trust in God who endures our pain – WITH US.

We have been living in challenging circumstances these past few months. Unsettling isolation. Unrelenting illnesses and deaths. Skyrocketing unemployment. Be assured, none of this has escaped God's notice. God is WITH US – and the outcome of this current crisis lies in the hands of a good, gracious, and all-powerful God.

Just as God has done in the past, God will pick up the shattered pieces of this current crisis – not from distance, but with us and through us.

Tomorrow we observe Memorial Day. We will commemorate the over 1.2 million men and women who have given their lives in service to our country. It is an occasion to mourn this enormous loss and to honor their remarkable sacrifice.

As I consider the horrendous impact of this pandemic, I wonder how we will memorialize those who have suffered and died. How will we bear the immense sorrow of these months: the deaths of nearly 100,000 Americans and over 330,000 people worldwide to the COVID-19 virus. How will we tell the story of our response to this pain and suffering – suffering endured by humanity, but also by God?

To the early Christians being persecuted by Rome, the author of 1 Peter proclaims: "After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and ***establish*** you." The Greek word translated as "*establish*" is the word used for laying the foundation of a building. It means digging down to bedrock, so that the foundation is solid as stone. Nothing will cause it to fall down.

Crises may come, catastrophes may happen, but the world will NOT collapse, because its firm foundation rests on the grace and power of God.⁴

Today is the final Sunday of the Easter season. For almost 2,000 years, our story has been one of Easter hope: Christ is alive and at work in the world. While the story of the COVID-19 crisis is not over, trust God will bring us through it to the other side. Be assured God is bearing our pain WITH US. Through it all, God **IS** restoring, supporting, strengthening, and establishing us through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Let us continue sharing this good news – our story of Easter hope – in all we say and all we do.

To God be the power, forever and ever. Amen.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 1-2.

² *Glory to God*, PCUSA Hymnal, "Christ Is Alive!" #246

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *God In Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering*, 118

⁴ Robert W. Stackel, *The Clergy Journal*, "Facing Up to Life's Worst," April 1993, 8