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The transformation of Suffering

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, oh Holy one.

For those of you that may not know, I am a cancer survivor. I was diagnosed at 19 with a brain tumor, and it has been a very

integral part of my life and spiritual journey. I mentioned one of my recurrences in a previous sermon. It's been a long journey so gives me a lot of material to work with. My most recent recurrence was about eight years ago when I was working in Higher Education. I had been in remission for about 8 or nine years at the time and was still pretty new to my job in California. When I found out that my cancer had come back a second time I was devastated.

I had no idea how I would get through this treatment process. I would need surgery, chemo, and radiation. They knew I would have some level of a deficit from the surgery but wouldn't know the specifics until the surgery was over. There were too many factors at play. After my surgery, I couldn't use my left arm because of some complications during the surgery, and ended up with some deficits that made it difficult for me to know where my left arm and leg were in relation to objects in

the world. I had to learn how to do things like tie my shoes and dress myself all over again. I had to rely on help from other people for food and transportation. My Dad was kind enough to come and help for a while. It was an exceptionally humbling experience. During my treatment, I went through cycles of serious depression because it was messing with the chemicals in my brain and well cancer is hard. I had to find new ways to connect and understand how my body worked. While my cancer

remains in remission, It is an ongoing journey to continue to connect and reconnect neural pathways as I age, learn new things and adapt to new spaces. The pain and depth of my suffering were something on a level I had yet to experience in my life. But I knew if I was going to survive it I would need to find some way to move through it over time. I had to find a way to transform it. I needed to find new perspectives on what I was going through, and over time I would be able to do that in community.

In our gospel text for today, we find Jesus addressing the disciples about many things. In what feels like a litany of suffering, Jesus describes the destruction of the temple and a list of terrible events that are yet to come.

Jesus warns about being led astray by those claiming to come in his name. He warns of nations rising against nations and kingdom against kingdom: earthquakes, famines, plagues, and great

signs from heaven. Sound familiar? And on top of that, Jesus adds that the disciples will be arrested and handed over to the prisons. Betrayed by friends and family and even put to death. Jesus says, “you will be hated because of my name”

While this text sounds much like an apocalyptic text, especially in our modern context, I think it may call us to examine something else. Our response. In this text, Jesus says very clearly that when all of this happens, and when the

disciples are arrested, they will have a chance to testify. For me, this is one of the most important moments of the text because it isn't something you need or should even be preparing for but a time when Jesus will give you what you need. Jesus will be there with us in our times of tremendous suffering. Sitting in it with us, asking us to bear witness with the power of the holy spirit to our suffering and the suffering of others. And this testimony this bearing witness is really the heart of this Gospel text for our world

today. How do we respond to suffering in our world? The things that cause human suffering clearly aren't new or unique. War, famine, and pandemics date back to biblical times, yet what will our response be? What is Jesus calling us to? This text also reminds us of the hope Jesus brought with him as well.

Jesus says, "But not a hair of your head will perish." As a resurrection people, we hear this and may also think of Jesus' sacrifice and suffering on the Cross.

Sometimes our response to suffering is

transformation. Like any kind of transformation, this isn't an overnight process, but gradually over time, with God's help and through bearing witness to our own suffering and the suffering of others, it can transform us. Sometimes that transformation moves us to action. I know for my journey I've turned to mentoring groups to provide support to newly diagnosed brain tumor patients so they don't feel as alone in their process. To help them bear witness to their pain, their joy to all of themselves that may

need a witness. Even in my deepest pain, I knew God was with me even if I was angry at God, crying with God, or bargaining with God. God was there, especially in the community of those who cared for me and worked with me as I healed.

I wonder what this text brings forward for you. How will we bear witness and testify as we move forward in our week? Might you finally join that ministry program you've been thinking about or book discussion? Maybe you've been

meaning to donate to your favorite non-profit. Whatever it might be, our Gospel calls us into an active response to the suffering in the world and in our community. To act where we can and not deny or ignore suffering but bear witness to it with God's help. With the community's help.

My prayer is that we may all find hope in Jesus as we bear witness in a suffering world. Amen