

The Rev. Alanna Sullivan:

Good morning.

Congregation:

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The Rev. Alanna Sullivan:

Welcome to morning prayers. Today's service will begin with a responsive reading from the black Appleton Psalter Book, Psalm number 16, found on page eight. Please stand, as you are able, as we read by whole verse.

The Rev. Alanna Sullivan:

"Preserve me, O God, for in thee do I put my trust."

Congregation:

"O my soul, thou hast said unto the Lord, Thou art my Lord, my goodness extendeth not to thee."

The Rev. Alanna Sullivan:

"But to the saints that are in the earth, and to the excellent, in whom is all my delight."

Congregation:

"Their sorrows shall be multiplied that hasten after another God. Their drink offerings of blood will I not offer, nor take up their names into my lips."

The Rev. Alanna Sullivan:

"The Lord is the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup. Thou maintainest my lot."

Congregation:

"The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places. Yea, I have a goodly heritage."

The Rev. Alanna Sullivan:

"I will bless the Lord, who hath given me counsel. My reins also instruct me in the night seasons."

Congregation:

"I have set the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved."

The Rev. Alanna Sullivan:

"Therefore, my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth. My flesh also shall rest in hope."

Congregation:

"For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption."

Choir:
(singing)

The Rev. Alanna Sullivan:

Good morning. Our reading for today comes from the Book of Psalms, Psalm number 56.

"You have kept count of my tossings and put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your record?"

A few years ago, I worked as a chaplain at a major hospital in Northern New England. Many clergy complete a chaplaincy internship as a part of their ordination process, and the objective of this program is to learn how to provide pastoral care, spiritual care, to patients and their families and the staff at the hospital. It is basically a crash course in how to handle critical and difficult situations.

When I entered the hospital each morning, I would have no idea how my day would unfold. One particular evening, I was paged to the ICU unit. When I stepped onto the floor, I noticed that there were several nurses huddled around the nursing station. I walked over to see which one of them had asked for a chaplain to come.

As I walked closer to the station, I overheard a few hushed whispers of, "So sad, such a tragedy. I don't know what I would do if I were them." Then one of the nurses pulled me aside to fill me in on what was going on. There was a young man, who had been rushed to the hospital a few days ago because of an accidental drug overdose, and he was now in a coma.

The medical staff had tried to revive him, but there was nothing else that they could do at this point. They had called the family to let them know that it was only a matter of time before his brain and heart would stop functioning, and the family had just arrived. I had been called to see if the family needed any support as they said goodbye.

I knocked before entering the hospital room, and inside I found the young man and his father alone. The father was sitting in a chair on the left side of the hospital bed, cupping his sons hands, with tears dripping down his face. He looked up at me and said, "I am a good man. I am a good father. Why did this happen? A parent is not supposed to bury his child."

The mystery of suffering is the biggest challenge to faith. It is bigger than explaining how you believe in miracle stories. It's bigger than saying you believe in a God who came to earth in human form. The mystery of suffering is the biggest challenge to faith. When a tragedy occurs and people want to know why, why did this happen, my most honest and faithful answer is, "I don't know."

The mystery of suffering is irreducible, for if you try to make sense of the situation, you don't give it justice. Any way you try to reduce the mystery, you end up saying something trite or offensive or just plain wrong, and it's not just you and I who can't explain it. Nobody can. Nobody's been able to explain suffering. Faithful, even brilliant, people have tried to do it through the centuries, and all have failed to do so.

When someone is grieving, a person might try to comfort them by saying, "God has a plan. Everything happens for a reason," but who can place their faith in a God who can rationalize playing with human lives so thoughtlessly? Another person might say that God wanted another angel in heaven, but who can place their faith in a God who is a snatcher of souls? Another person might say, "This happened because God wants us to learn the preciousness of life," but who wants anything to do with a God who teaches us like that? People who encounter tragedy feel like they need to come up with some magic words to make sense of the situation or to diminish the pain. People grab for anything that is closest at hand.

Rabbi Harold Kushner explains the word answer has two dimensions to it. If by answer you mean, is there an explanation that makes sense of it all... Why is there cancer in the world? Why did my mother get cancer? Why did that car crash happen? Why did my child die? There are no satisfying answers that can explain the reason for suffering. Some abstract answer to explain the origins of suffering will not take away a person's pain. Their pain and suffering will remain underneath our clever words.

There is, however, a second dimension to the word answer. To answer can also mean to simply respond. This way, our question of why did this happen to us transforms into what am I going to do? Can I forgive this world for not being perfect? Can I forgive God for not making a better world? Can I reach out to the people around us and go on living despite it all?

So how do we respond to someone who is suffering? I don't think people need new magic words. In fact, we can trust many of the words that we have heard our entire lives. "I love you," and, "I'm sorry," are important and powerful things to say. They still hold value. There is a reason why people turn to them again and again. These words do not attempt to explain away the suffering or pain. They acknowledge it. They accept it, because suffering is irreducible.

Sometimes not even words are needed. Sometimes we just need to sit and be present and silent. You know what? The psalmist is right. God keeps track of our sorrows and collects our tears in a bottle and records each one. Let us pray.

Watch, dear Lord, with those who wake or weep this day. Let Your angels protect those who sleep. Tend the sick. Refresh the weary. Sustain the dying. Calm the suffering. Pity the distressed. We ask all of this for Your love's sake, amen.

Let us now pray the prayer that Jesus taught us, saying, "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever, amen."

Please stand, as you are able, to sing the hymn Breathe on Me, Breath of God, hymn number 247, found in your crimson Harvard Hymn Book.

Congregation:

(singing)

The Rev. Alanna Sullivan:

As we go into this day, may the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord's face shine upon you and be gracious unto you, and may the Lord grant you peace. May the church say, "Amen."

Congregation:

Amen.