

Scripture: Matthew 16:21-28

Sermon Title: "Trials and Triumph"

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It's natural for us to want to try and avoid suffering. Whatever suffering means to you, it is part of our very nature to flee from it and of course, to never willingly seek it out. I would venture a guess that no one wakes up in the morning, stretches, looks out the window, and says, "Good morning world - how can I suffer today? What trials can I face today?" We probably don't do it, because it would seem that it is within our nature to not seek out trials and tribulations for our lives. And yet, even though we do not seek them, they seem to, at least from time to time, find us anyway.

My very first service trip, mission trip with my church growing up, was to New Orleans, 2 years after Hurricane Katrina devastated the area. Lives lost, lives displaced, lives redefined by this storm and they were still, 2 years later, recovering from the trials of two years prior. Many homes still sat empty as lack of funds for some and loss of hope for others prevented them from regaining their lives as they once were. 2 years later, there was still an immense need for support and love expressed through action as individuals and families were striving to regain their lives. And while the physical storm had long passed and the physical flood waters had long since receded, the metaphorical storm still lingered in the lives of many - for the suffering, for the trials were still very present.

And yet, even in the midst of the suffering, in the midst of the trials, the rays of sunshine, the rays of hope, were still there. For some, our group's presence and work was one of those rays - a reminder that the world had not forgotten them and that there was still hope for life to find a sense of normalcy. But while we and groups like us who were still traveling in to New Orleans to help did shine such hope, we were by no means the only sign of hope. For there were many signs coming from within - many signs coming from those who were in the midst of their own suffering, and yet were

shining love and hope into the world, into our lives and the lives of others. One instance in particular has stuck with me, as we were working on gutting out a home that had sat vacant since the storm, in a cul-de-sac that too was rather quiet for few homeowners had yet been able to rebuild. And one of the few signs of life, was three houses down from us. For a couple had been living in a FEMA trailer on their front lawn since the storm passed. They were slowly working on their home but the work was indeed slow. And when they saw us working just a few houses down, they came, shining a ray of love into our lives, as they introduced themselves. They opened their FEMA trailer to us, a group of about 15 strangers, if we needed to use the bathroom at any point through the day – just come on in! On one particular cool, crisp, and rainy morning, they called us all over to the trailer to provide us with hot tea to warm us up. Even in the midst of what most would consider suffering as this couple, who lost everything they owned, lived on their front lawn in a FEMA trailer, hoping, praying, and working toward the day when their life would be restored, they did not allow the suffering to rule over them. As they extended hospitality, they did not allow the suffering to reign. But, they also did not deny it either. They embraced the trial, knowing that it would not have the last word. And when they were able to embrace life through the challenge, through the suffering, they were able to not only see rays of hope but to be ray of hope in the midst of it all.

In our scripture reading today from the Gospel of Matthew, we see that, for Jesus, a storm was coming. As Jesus tells his disciples of the trials he will soon face, the suffering and death to come in Jerusalem, there is an understandable concern from his disciples, for again, no one likes suffering. And, when Peter speaks up saying, God forbid it, it's almost like he was saying there is no good that could come from such suffering. There is no good that could come from death. But he clearly wasn't listening to Jesus. For in the same breath that he talked about the impending cross in his life, the impending storm, the impending suffering, Jesus also spoke of the ray of hope that would indeed follow. In the same sentence, he told them that yes death was coming,

but it would not be the end, for on the third day he would rise. Yes a trial was coming, but it would not have the last word.

And so, while we do not intentionally seek out the storms of life, we do not run from them either, we do not pretend that that they don't exist, we do not fool ourselves into thinking they will never strike our lives. For when Jesus says, "take up your cross and follow me", we are being encouraged to face the storms of life that will inevitably come and to be the ray of hope that breaks through from amidst the darkest days. We are encouraged to not turn our face away from suffering, but to be a ray of hope in the midst of it. For in the end, suffering will never have the last word. This is the faith that comes from the cross. That even when suffering in our lives leads to death, even there, suffering has not won, for the resurrection eternally heals.

We will face trials in our lives, there is no doubt about it. There will be suffering, there will be challenges. But just as Jesus acknowledged the suffering and in the same breath declared that it would not have the last word, may we too face the trials but always acknowledge that a triumph is coming. May we be like that couple from New Orleans who spoke of their loss and invited us into their home in the same breath. May we acknowledge the hardships that come our way and still always see the hope or if we can't see the hope, create it. And when hope is hard to see and hard to create, may we always look toward Jesus Christ, for he is the giver of hope founded in his unfailing love which conquers all. And so, I will say it again, may we acknowledge the trials of life and, in the same breath, speak of the triumph that is to come. Amen.