

Nokesville UMC Sunday Worship [Lent VI]
March 28, 2021
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We Suffer, God Suffers
Matthew 27:45-46

(1)

Last Sunday, we focused on the character Father Ferreira in the movie and Judas Iscariot in the Gospel of Matthew with the key phrase “our frustration.” The apostasy of Father Ferreira and the betrayal of Judas Iscariot were derived from their own frustration. Ferreira became frustrated because he believed that all his mission work in Japan for 15 years was a fruitless effort. Judas became frustrated because he might have believed that the 3 years with Jesus went down the drain and was a waste of his time. Thus, one decided to apostatize from Christianity and the other to betray Jesus Christ. Today, the last day and the climax of the sermon series, we will focus on the character Father Rodrigues in the movie and Jesus Christ in the Gospel of Matthew with the key phrase “God’s silence.”

(2)

Before Father Rodrigues came to Japan, he must have prepared for what would happen to him. But the reality was much harsher and more painful. Japanese Kirishitans in the small village were persecuted; some of them were martyred; others were scattered; and the village that once was full of people with sounds of laughter and prayers now became ruined. After Rodrigues was arrested, he saw the Japanese Kirishitans in the prison being forced to apostatize or being martyred. One day, Father Rodrigues was brought to the seashore and was forced to see the death of the Japanese Kirishitans, including his co-missionary Father Garupe. There was nothing he could do, not a single thing for the Japanese Kirishitans or Father Garupe. Before their persecution and death, he kept asking why God has been silent in the midst of their suffering. (video) In the prison, he kept reciting Jesus’s last words on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” His murmuring “He is not going to answer” rings in our ears.

Finally, he came to meet his teacher Father Ferreira who was one of the two reasons why Father Rodrigues came to Japan. Father Ferreira might have been the last hope for Rodrigues to preserve his faith. However, their reunion made Father Rodrigues discard his last hope and faith because he was there to persuade Father Rodrigues to abandon his faith. (video).

Inquisitor Inoue and Father Ferreira drove Father Rodrigues to the edge of a precipice. And he finally decided... (video) His life after apostasy was completely different. He abandoned his name and lived as a Japanese man named Oneka Sanemon with his wife and her son. (video) When he died and was cremated, a small wooden cross that Mokichi, one of his Japanese Kirishitans in the small village gave before his persecution and death was in his hand. The last scene gives us a lot of reflections and thoughts and gives us a question, “Did Father Rodrigues really apostatize?” “What is the true meaning of apostasy?” Father Rodrigues who struggled with God’s silence in the midst of suffering finished his life in this way.

(3)

Jesus Christ also fought against God’s silence at a very critical time. He was always connected to and communicated with God the Father. But the very moment on the cross, God kept silent in the midst of the suffering of His only begotten Son. Jesus cried out, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” “My God, my God, why

have you forsaken me?" (v. 47). These were Jesus's seven last words on the cross. When Jesus prayed in Gethsemane, He said, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will" (26:39). Even if the cup is too bitter to drink, Jesus obeyed God's will. But at that very moment, Jesus might have felt that the suffering of the cross overwhelmed Him and that God kept silent amidst His suffering. That very moment, Jesus felt that God forsook Him. If so, the Son's suffering insignificant to the Father? Was the suffering of the Japanese Kirishitans in the movie insignificant to God? If so, is our suffering insignificant to God?

(4)

We keep asking God, "Why do You keep silent in the mist of our suffering?" This is the key reason why we started the sermon series with the book and the movie "Silence." There is a hidden assumption in the question whether we perceive it or not. In this question, we come to think of God who is apart from us. At a certain distance from above, God has watched over us. And when we are in suffering and when His children are in the midst of suffering, God has to reach out His hands and save us from our suffering. The problem is we experience His silence and cannot find any helping hand that can save us from our suffering. In this situation, we may say like Father Rodrigues, "I pray but I am lost. Or am I praying to nothing because You are not there?"

Why have we come to think of God who is apart from us, who has watched over us from above, and who has to save us from our suffering? A possible reason is that we have read and listened to the story of God in the Old Testament who actively intervened in human history in this way—being apart from above, listening to their cries, and saving them from their suffering. We have focused on human suffering. Switching our focus, have you ever thought of how God felt when He watched His people's suffering? Was God impassible before His people's suffering? Well, parents here must understand when your child is sick or injured, groaning in pain, suffering from serious illness, or returns to our enteral home ahead of you. You are with him or her; you feel pain just as your child felt; you are heartbroken. God is the same; God was with them, and God suffered with them when His people were in the midst of suffering.

If we accept the understanding of the suffering God, we come to understand that Father Rodrigues who writhed in desperate agony seeing the persecuted Japanese Kirishitans as the image or the reflection of God who writhed in even more desperate agony in the midst of their suffering. God was there. God suffered with Father Rodrigues. God suffered with the Japanese Kirishitans.

On the cross, God was there with His only begotten Son. When He was nailed, God was nailed, too. When He wore the crown of thorns, God wore it, too. When He was mocked and spat upon, God was also mocked and spat upon. God was there. God suffered with Jesus. God's silence in the midst of the suffering of Father Rodrigues, Japanese Kirishitans, and Jesus Christ was another expression that He suffered with them.

Are you disappointed with God who suffers rather than immediately saves us from our suffering with His mighty power? If so, you come to struggle with God's silence in the midst of your suffering. But when we accept the suffering God, God is not the One who is apart from us and saves us from our suffering any longer. Instead, God is the One who is with us when we are in the midst of our suffering. Not only is God with us but He also suffers with us. Don't be disappointed at the suffering God. Salvation comes from God who suffered with His Son. Comfort comes from God who suffers with us. Liberation from our suffering comes from God who suffers with us. Amen.