

Twenty-five years can be a long time, especially if you're in a place that you don't want to be.

For twenty-five years, the people of Israel have been away from home. 25 years ago, the Babylonian armies swept through Judah and destroyed Jerusalem. The last time they saw the holy city, it was a wasteland of rubble and flame--nothing left, just devastation.

It's been a long 25 years because they're strangers in a strange land; but that's not all. They are in Babylon because they blew it. They turned away from the Lord to a bunch of false gods that had no way to defend them. They thought they were invincible; after all, they had the temple. And as long as God was in His temple, there was no way that the city would fall. When the walls fell, the temple was vacant; since Judah had forsaken God and wanted nothing to do with Him, the Lord consented to their eviction notice and departed. Jerusalem fell.

Of course, among those captives are some faithful people of God. They trusted Him and worshiped Him throughout the fall of Jerusalem. But despite their trust, they are still captives in Babylon. Despite God's faithfulness, they still suffer.

Is it hopeless? Is this the end? Will Israel be no more? Will their children grow up in Babylon, sacrificed to the immorality and idolatry there? Has God departed forever?

It is to these suffering believers that the prophet Ezekiel speaks comforting words. In a vision, the Lord takes Ezekiel back to the hill of Jerusalem; and in the vision, the city is no longer in ruins. There are buildings, a temple, gates and a wall. And as Ezekiel looks to the East, the Lord returns to His temple. Though many might forsake Him, He does not forsake His people. As His glory fills the temple once more, He declares to Ezekiel (and thus to His people!), "Son of man, this is the place of My throne and the place of the soles of My feet, where I will dwell in the midst of the children of Israel forever." God promises that He has not abandoned them; no, He will be present forever. He will not always be present in a temple made of stone; when the Savior comes, God will be present with His people in a temple of flesh. God will become man to save His people.

In the meantime, God has still not abandoned His people there in Babylon, of this they can be sure. He's sent Ezekiel to be His prophet; and as the prophet declares the Word of God, God Himself is present there.

The captivity in Babylon will end. Many will even get to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild it. As they do so, they have this assurance; although there is suffering in the world, God has not abandoned them. His promises are sure.

Long after that captivity ends, there's another wasteland in Jerusalem. The walls and the buildings are still standing, and the temple looks stunning once again. But it's still a wasteland--a wasteland of faith. Once again, nearly all the people there have turned away from the one true God. They would say otherwise, because this is an insidious idol which controls them--self-righteousness. They believe that they are pleasing God because of the things that they do. They are good in His sight because they do good things.

It's a common false god, this idea that people earn God's favor by being good. But it always leads people to trust in themselves more than God; and it leads them to love themselves more than God. And when people love themselves more than God, it is only a matter of time until they hold God in contempt. Consider the people of Jerusalem in our Gospel lesson: Although they believe that they are living a life pleasing to the Lord, they are so turned from Him that they are killing His Son.

Jesus, the Savior, the Son of God, is hanging on a cross.

Not just God's Son; this is Mary's Son, too. Her privilege of being the mother of Jesus has brought her both joy and sorrow. The joys of seeing Jesus grow have been many. There have certainly been a few worries along the way as well. There was the time, soon after His birth, when they had to flee to Egypt because Herod tried to kill Him; or the time when He was twelve and they lost Him in Jerusalem for three days. There was that day when He returned to Nazareth as a teacher, and his hometown neighbors tried to kill Him. Of course, Mary was duly warned; back when she and Joseph took Jesus to the temple on His 40th day, Simeon promised Mary, "A sword will pierce through your own soul also" (Lk. 2:35).

The sword is never more piercing than now, for the mother of Jesus stands below His cross, accompanied by the disciple John. Three hours will never be longer than when a mother watches her Son die in agony.

One might raise the objection: Is this fair? Is it fair that the mother of Jesus be treated in this way? Where is God, when all of this is happening? Why must Mary's soul be pierced, this faithful servant of the Lord?

As Mary stands at the foot of the cross, Jesus speaks a second time. The first time was to pray for His enemies. This time, He speaks for the good of His mother; even on the cross, the Son obeys the 4th commandment. "Woman," He says, "Behold your son." "Son," He says to John, "Behold your mother." And from that day, John takes Mary into his own home to care for her.

But, why John? There are other brothers of Jesus around, far more closely related to Mary. Why is John given the task of caring for Mary?

Because John is a disciple, called by Jesus and taught by Jesus. The Savior is not just concerned that Mary have food to eat and a roof over her head. He wants her comforted with the Word of God. John is to tell Mary what Jesus has taught him about living, life and death. John isn't just Mary's surrogate son, here. Jesus wants to make sure that His mother hears true hope.

What is true for the captives of Babylon is also true for the mother of Jesus as she stands below the cross. Past all the sorrow and suffering and woe, the truth remains: God is faithful, and He will not abandon His people. How faithful? To the question, "Where is God that day?" we need not look far. He is just above Mary, dying on the cross to take away her sins. Although she suffers dearly that Good Friday afternoon, it is true that the Lord is present with Mary in her suffering; in fact, He is suffering for her so that, though she mourns, she will be comforted.

You look at Mary on that dark day, and you see truth. Christians face suffering in this world.

It may not seem fair, and it is a stumbling block to many. Worse yet, our Enemy kicks us when we're down, whispering things to us like: "If you're only good enough, you will please God and not suffer. Therefore, if you are suffering, either you aren't good enough for God; or else God has truly abandoned you." Or, "If you'd just work at being good a little harder, that would make the bad go away." Or, in times of peace, he tempts us to say, "Life is good, so I must be doing good before God." In every case he wants you to make your goodness your trust, rather than making Jesus your trust. We need to learn to recognize these thoughts as temptation, not truth.

But the question remains: If we are sons of God and heirs of eternal life, why does such suffering come along?

Scripture tells us. Remember how the world treated Christ, your King; and do not be surprised that the world treats His Church and His children the same way. The devil, the world and the sinful flesh each paint a target upon you, intending to make you as miserable as they are allowed; they know that you are redeemed, and they wish to make you believe that God does not care, that He has abandoned you. Therefore, there is suffering for the Christian; we must live lives under the cross.

But 'under the cross' isn't such a bad place to be, because that's where you can hear the crucified Savior speak.

Last week we heard him pray to the Father for the forgiveness of those who do not know what they are doing. This priceless gift of grace is yours, no matter what else is weighing you down.

Today we hear: "Woman, behold your son," He declares, and "Son, behold your mother." With these dying words, He provides. He provides another way through the suffering. Mutual consolation and support. In other words, each other. He makes people who are not "blood-related" related to one another not by their blood but by His. That's what a church is. No Christian ever needs to suffer alone. Pray that the Holy Spirit would open our hearts to receive care from one another.

Any time can be a long time, especially when you don't want to be where you are. This will often be the case when you find yourself in suffering. But take heart and look to Jesus; the Lord's suffering for the sins of the world had an end, and yours will too. For now, you live under the cross. But because you are there, you hear Him say that you are fully forgiven. You hear him say you have a family of faith that will carry you and be there for you. It may not be the way you would choose, but it is His way; the way that leads through suffering into unimaginable glory.

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