Genesis 18:20-32

*Jesus came to die for sinners and restore us to wholeness with God.*

During Bible study at the overnight camp two questions that frequently came up among the youth were, “Why do bad things happen to good people” and “Where is God in suffering?” These are two deeply important faith questions and I think they serve as a good reminder that children and youth are members of the church of Jesus Christ now, and they are listening and ask great faith questions.

I also know that even if they are never voiced every disciple of Jesus wonders these same questions from time to time. Unfortunately, I don’t have an answer for you to the first question. Disciples have been wresting with that question for years, and if you look in the Bible you will find a variety of thoughts on the matter, but none that claims to be the one true answer.

Even the Book of Job, THE greatest book of the Bible on human suffering, does not give a clear answer only a list of falsehoods about suffering. At the end of Job all we learn is that God declares Jobs friends are wrong about God, Job, and suffering when they believe that bad things only happen to people because they have done something wrong, that money, power, and success are always signs of God’s favor and love, and that Job is simply being stubborn and not admitting his evil and that is why he suffers.

Even Jesus says nothing clear about why bad things happen to good people. When asked by his disciples who sinned to cause a man to be born blind his family or someone else Jesus simply says they are asking the wrong question, but he gives no further explanation of the nature of suffering.

Even though I can’t give you an answer to that first question I can give you one to the second one. To do that let’s look at the first reading today from the Book of Genesis.

The story opens with God declaring to Abraham that he will destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah for their great and terrible sin. We are never told explicitly what the sin is, and people have wrestled with it for years. Some think the sin was homosexuality, and another leading view is that the sin was being inhospitable to others.

I don’t personally think either of these answers is satisfactory. I believe that the sin of the cities was to hate God so much that they felt they could do whatever they wanted to anyone and get away with it, and that includes engaging in violent gang rape against others especially those most vulnerable in society.

The point of the story though is not to focus on the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah. If we focus to much on that we can’t see the trees for the forest and miss the real point. The point of the story is to ask the question, “Does God punish the righteous for the sins of the wicked?”

With this in mind we see one of the most moving scenes in Holy Scripture. Abraham, the faithful beloved servant of God, begins to chastise and talk to God on behalf of the innocent. “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?”

Abraham even goes so far as to tell God that it would violate the very nature of who God is when he says, “Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked!”

Abraham reminds God of God’s very nature. That God is loving, merciful, and just. He then bargains with God to spare the cities even if there are just 10 righteous in the city. Imagine the faith Abraham has in who God is to plead for the evil cities to be spared for even 10 righteous people. Now in the end the cities are destroyed, but God does ensure that Lot and his family, the righteous in the cities, escape.

What does this story tell us about God? It tells us that God does care about suffering, that God does desire justice, and that God does not punish some for the sins of others. It shows us that God does hear people when they cry out in suffering, and it shows us that God listens to prayer and in the case of todays story to what we call intercessory prayer.

I personally think this story is beautiful and moving, and it reminds me of why we have the prayers of intercession every worship service, because as ambassadors for Jesus Christ we are called to pray to God for the sake of the world.

But one question I always wonder is “Why stop at 10?” It’s not like God is actually showing any signs of getting annoyed. Every time Abraham asks, God agrees to lower the total. What if Abraham had asked for 5? Or how about this? What if Abraham had asked for just one?

In a way, the Christian answer to that question is Jesus Christ, the righteous one. Jesus is both the one whose righteousness saves all the rest of us and our version of Abraham: the one who is always praying for us, always pleading for us, always standing in the breach on our behalf as our champion.

Abraham pleaded with God for the sake of the righteous in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, but Jesus Christ came to plead for and die for the sake of both the righteous and the wicked. It is when we look to Jesus that we can see the answer to the second question, “Where is God when we suffer?”

God saw the world struggling and crying out in enslavement to sin, death, and the devil and God decided to come and do something about it. So, God came down from heaven and took on flesh by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary to become the person of Jesus Christ who we celebrate every Advent as Emanuel, God with us.

Jesus then spent his life with and among us sharing in our living by eating with people, preaching the good news of the Kingdom of God who all who came to him, teaching what it means to be a disciple, healing the sick, casting out demons, and welcoming everyone to come and follow him, to come and be with him.

When the time came Jesus willingly went to die on the cross to take on all the forces of sin, death, and the devil so that all who believe in him could be freed from them to live for God and one another.

God then vindicated Jesus as innocent, beloved, and holy by raising him from the dead. Jesus then ascended into heaven where he continues intercedes for us in prayer and send the Holy Spirit to disciples to guide and help us.

Where is God when we suffer? Right here with us loving us. Jesus demonstrates this his birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension, because Jesus is God come down from heaven to intercede for us.

Jesus continues to be with us by the Holy Spirit in the waters of Holy Baptism where we become children of God, receive the forgiveness of sins, and become part of the body of Christ: the church.

Jesus feeds each one of us with his very body and blood in bread and wine at the alter so that we take him into our very bodies and are reminded of his deep love for us as we go out to serve and love others in his name.

I don’t know why good people suffer. I hope someday to have an answer but until then I do know that God does not rejoice when we suffer or are in pain, that God does not condone actions of evil and violence, that God hears us when we cry out in times of pain or suffering, that Jesus is constantly praying for us, and that no matter what we are never alone because the Triune God is forever with us. Amen.