

ME: Yesterday I presided at the funeral of a parishioner who died after a long, courageous battle with cancer.

He was a young married man with school age children.

I visited him at home a few weeks before he passed to anoint him and give him communion.

During our time together his wife said to me,

“Father Mike, we’re struggling to understand why?

Why him, why now, why us?”

So we talked and prayed - I did the best I could

to help them see that God was with them in their suffering.

But as I was driving home, I wondered if I’d answered their questions.

WE: When someone we love is hurting,

it is hard to know what to do or say.

And when we feel their pain, it can be hard to have hope;

hard to believe that God is listening or cares.

I know, I’ve been there.

And I will speak more about that in a few minutes.

SCREEN: Hope in the Dark main screen

This is week two of our message series titled, Hope in the Dark.

Just to review, this series is for two types of people:

for those who are going through something big right now -

something like a health crisis, a relationship problem,

a struggle with work or finances.

And this series is also for those who will one day go through something like that.

In other words, this series is for everyone.

I keep hearing those words of a preacher who once said

to his congregation,

you're either coming out of a trial, are in the middle of a trial

or you're going into a trial because life can be difficult for everyone.

In this series, we're speaking honestly.

Not resorting to trite cliches or pious platitudes because when you're hurting, you want answers.

You want to know, *"where are you God?*

Don't you care about what I'm going through?"

Let's review these key points from last week:

SCREEN: 1 It is okay to question God.

2 God is not trying to hurt you.

3 You have all the faith you need.

4 You are not alone.

Number 1: it's okay to question God.

Prophets and kings and saints questioned God.

Even Jesus, hanging on the cross asked God,

"Why have you abandoned me?"

Point Two: God is not trying to hurt you.

Your struggle is not a punishment.

God loves you and always will.

Number 3. You have all the faith you need for whatever you're going through.

And fourth, you are not alone. Not alone.

In the readings today, we heard about some people who doubted all these things.

Let's see how God answered.

SCREEN: blank red background

GOD: We heard two stories about lepers who were healed.

Leprosy in ancient times was a death sentence.

It was about as horrible a way to die as you could imagine.

They didn't know what caused it,

it was highly contagious and there was no cure.

People with leprosy were treated as outcasts.

They were disowned by family, ejected from their towns
and forced to beg, until they died.

On top of that, the Jewish people believed that leprosy was a
curse from God, a punishment.

So those with leprosy were required to live apart from everyone else.

They felt hatred from everyone.

Their lives were a living hell.

I am sure that every day - dozens of times each day -
they cried out and asked:

"Where are you God!"

Probably raged at God asking,

"Why me! I didn't deserve this.

Don't you care?!?"

When folks are in a really dark place, sometimes they decide there is no God.

I've even heard some say,

I can't believe in a God who does this to someone!

And my response is,

"tell me about this God you don't believe in because

I probably don't believe in that God either.

I don't believe God sits up in heaven rolls the dice and decides,
today this person gets terminal cancer.

Today this town has a mass shooting.

Today, this island gets a major hurricane.

No.

That is no God I believe in.

That's not a loving God, that's a sadist.

Jesus is the God of love and compassion.

He tore down every wall or barrier that ignorance had built
to be with those who were suffering; letting them know God loved and

cared for them and was always with them.

That's what he did in the Gospel today when he healed the lepers.

It's impossible to not be moved by this story of God restoring hope to the hopeless.

YOU: But if you are going through something painful, you can hear this story and ask the question,

What about me?

God, won't you heal me?

Won't you cure my loved one?

Won't you fix my marriage?

Won't you help my child?

Won't you help me get a better job?

And if you are waiting for years and don't get the answer you want, how can you NOT think that God doesn't seem to care?

Why are some helped and others are not?

I don't have that answer.

I do know that miraculous healings like the one in the Gospel are very rare.

Jesus didn't heal every leper or sick person.

He didn't raise every dead person or feed every hungry person.

He healed and performed miracles to reveal the presence of God.

And his message, over and over was:

this world is not your home, an eternal home awaits you in heaven.

Now that may sound like a cop out or just a pious phrase,

but it's what we believe as followers of Christ.

He may not have physically healed every sick person,

but he did offer spiritual healing and comfort to every person he met.

I've anointed thousands of people in my years as a priest.

When I administer the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick,

I'm not giving a promise of physical healing to the person.

I know of only one or two people who claimed a miraculous healing.

But I have seen hundreds of spiritual healings.

I've witnessed people moved to tears...tears of joy.

People who have said, *"thank you!*

I feel better. I know I'm not alone.

I feel some calm, some peace, some hope!"

So I've witnessed Christ perform spiritual healings all the time.

And even if the physical healing doesn't happen for you or me or someone we love, the suffering gives a new perspective.

I experienced this with my own family.

During my dad's illness and death last year, our family really came together.

Everyone stepped up to be there for my mom and dad.

We were more generous, understanding, and forgiving.

Our priorities got straight in a hurry.

At that moment, the most important thing in life was staring us in the face.

All that mattered was caring for our dad.

The petty and insignificant melted away.

When I've been at the bedside of parishioners

and talked with their family members, they've told me the same thing.

The family I mentioned at the beginning of this message told me:

people have been great...families from school, people from work, even our neighbors have done so much for us.

Having the support of others doesn't take away the cross, but makes it easier to bear.

Suffering teaches an important lesson to believers - that we need to call out to God in times of need.

Suffering can also be offered up for others who are hurting.

And it can bring the faith of others alive when they realize what life is all about.

So if you are carrying something big right now or know someone who is,

consider all the ways that God is supporting you.

Through family, friends, other parishioners and the larger Church.

99% of the time, God comes to us through others;

this is Jesus's plan for his followers.

It's why he called disciples to support each other.

It's why he formed a community of believers to be there for each other after he returned to heaven.

Faith is not a solitary pursuit.

To get through life, and find your way through the darkness, you need others.

Each week of this series, we're offering you some very real and practical ways to connect with others.

One of those ways happens today.

Right after Mass in the entranceway, you can sign up for an adult small group.

We introduced small groups five years ago and new groups are starting.

I've been in a men's small group for several years now and it has helped my faith enormously.

Small groups are 8-12 parishioners who meet weekly in a member's home.

They discuss the weekend readings and message, pray together and encourage each other to grow in faith.

You can join a group just for men, just for women, for men and women together or for young adults.

Why should you consider this opportunity?

When we're together we grow stronger.

Together people can strengthen one another and encourage one another.

It's living one's faith as Christ intends.

And next week you can experience our prayer ministry at the end of Mass.

We've offered this several times in the past and we offer it at Friday Night Praise.

It's an opportunity to be supported in your struggle
by the prayers of another parishioner.

SCREEN: Hand reaching out

WE: When we're struggling, when we've lost hope and only see the darkness,

God is saying, I'm here!

I'm coming to save you!

I'm reaching out my hand.

Now just take hold.

Let me be your hope in the dark. Amen. +