Lament for a Son

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What is suffering? When something prized or loved is ripped away or never granted—work, someone loved, recognition of one's dignity, life without physical pain—that is suffering.

Or rather, that's when suffering happens. What it is, I do not know. For many days I had been reflecting on it. Then suddenly, as I watched the flicker of orange-pink evening light on almost still water, the thought overwhelmed me: I understand nothing of it. Of pain, yes: cut fingers, broken bones. Of sorrow and suffering, nothing at all. Suffering is a mystery as deep as any in our existence. It is not of course a mystery whose reality some doubt. Suffering keeps its face hid from each while making itself known to all.

We are one in suffering. Some are wealthy, some bright; some athletic, some admired. But we all suffer. For we all prize and love; and in this present existence of ours, prizing and loving yield suffering. Love in our world is suffering love. Some do not suffer much, though, for they do not love much. Suffering is for the loving. If I hadn't loved him, there wouldn't be this agony.

This, said Jesus, is the command of the Holy One: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." In commanding us to love, God invites us to suffer.
God is love. That is why he suffers. To love our suffering sinful world is to suffer. God so suffered for the world that he gave up his only Son to suffering. The one who does not see God’s suffering does not see his love. God is suffering love.

So suffering is down at the center of things, deep down where the meaning is. Suffering is the meaning of our world. For Love is the meaning. And Love suffers. The tears of God are the meaning of history.

But mystery remains. Why isn’t Love-without-suffering the meaning of things? Why is suffering-Love the meaning? Why does God endure his suffering? Why does he not at once relieve his agony by relieving ours?

We’re in it together, God and we, together in the history of our world. The history of our world is the history of our suffering together. Every act of evil extracts a tear from God, every plunge into anguish extracts a sob from God. But also the history of our world is the history of our deliverance together. God’s work to release himself from his suffering is his work to deliver the world from its agony; our struggle for joy and justice is our struggle to relieve God’s sorrow.

When God’s cup of suffering is full, our world’s redemption is fulfilled. Until justice and peace embrace, God’s dance of joy is delayed.

The bells for the feast of divine joy are the bells for the shalom of the world.
“Put your hand into my wounds,” said the risen Jesus to Thomas, “and you will know who I am.” The wounds of Christ are his identity. They tell us who he is. He did not lose them. They went down into the grave with him and they came up with him—visible, tangible, palpable. Rising did not remove them. He who broke the bonds of death kept his wounds.

To believe in Christ’s rising from the grave is to accept it as a sign of our own rising from our graves. If for each of us it was our destiny to be obliterated, and for all of us together it was our destiny to fade away without a trace, then not Christ’s rising but my dear son’s early dying would be the logo of our fate.

Slowly I begin to see that there is something more as well. To believe in Christ’s rising and death’s dying is also to live with the power and the challenge to rise up now from all our dark graves of suffering love. If sympathy for the world’s wounds is not enlarged by our anguish, if love for those around us is not expanded, if gratitude for what is good does not flame up, if insight is not deepened, if commitment to what is important is not strengthened, if aching for a new day is not intensified, if hope is weakened and faith diminished, if from the experience of death comes nothing good, then death has won. Then death, be proud.

So I shall struggle to live the reality of Christ’s rising and death’s dying. In my living, my son’s dying will not be the last word. But as I rise up, I bear the wounds of his death. My rising does not remove them. They mark me. If you want to know who I am, put your hand in.
“By his wounds we are healed.” In the wounds of Christ is humanity’s healing.

Do our wounds also heal? This gaping wound in my chest—does it heal? What before I did not see, I now see; what before I did not feel, I now feel. But this raw bleeding cavity which needs so much healing, does it heal while waiting for healing? We are the body of Christ on earth. Does that mean that some of our wounds are his wounds, and that some of our wounds heal?

Is our suffering ever redemptive? I suppose the blood of the martyrs sometimes was. It was an instrument of God’s peace. But my suffering over my son, which I did not choose and would never choose: does that bring peace? How? To whom?

Is there something more to say than that death is the mortal enemy of peace? Can suffering over death—not living at peace with death but suffering in the face of death—bring peace?
Suffering may do us good—may be a blessing, something to be thankful for. This I have learned.

Ordinarily we think of the powerful and wealthy as blessed; they enjoy the “good things of life.” But maybe the little ones, the downtrodden peoples and assaulted persons, are blessed as well. I do not mean that they will be compensated for their sufferings. I mean that perhaps the treading down is itself a blessing, or can become a blessing, rich as any coming to those we call “the lucky ones.”

Suffering is the shout of “No” by one’s whole existence to that over which one suffers—the shout of “No” by nerves and gut and gland and heart to pain, to death, to injustice, to depression, to hunger, to humiliation, to bondage, to abandonment. And sometimes, when the cry is intense, there emerges a radiance which elsewhere seldom appears: a glow of courage, of love, of insight, of selflessness, of faith. In that radiance we see best what humanity was meant to be.

That the radiance which emerges from acquaintance with grief is a blessing to others is familiar, though perplexing. How can we treasure the radiance while struggling against what brought it about? How can we thank God for suffering’s yield while asking for its removal? But what I have learned is something stranger still: Suffering may be among the sufferer’s blessings. I think of a former colleague who, upon recovering from a heart attack, remarked that he would not have missed it for the life of him.

In the valley of suffering, despair and bitterness are brewed. But there also character is made. The valley of suffering is the vale of soul-making.

But now things slip and slide around. How do I tell my blessings? For what do I give thanks and for what do I lament? Am I sometimes to sorrow over my delight and sometimes to delight over my sorrow? And how do I sustain my “No” to my son’s early death while accepting with gratitude the opportunity offered of becoming what otherwise I could never be?

How do I receive my suffering as blessing while repulsing the obscene thought that God jiggled the mountain to make me better?
Suddenly here he is again. The chain of suggestion can begin almost anywhere: a phrase heard in a lecture, an unpainted board on a house, a lamp-pole, a stone. From such innocuous things my imagination winds its sure way to my wound. Everything is charged with the potential of a reminder. There's no forgetting.

His younger brothers had begun to ask him for advice. To Claire and me he had become an equal, no longer a child to be cared for. Now he's gone, and the family has to restructure itself. We don't just each have a gap inside us but together a gap among us. We have to live differently with each other. We have to live around the gap. Pull one out, and everything changes.
It's been a year now since I last saw this small patch of earth. Then it was piles of dirt and a hole. Now I can scarcely tell. Then it was surrounded by teared humanity. Now just mother and father, sister and brothers. The gardeners are gone, the neighborhood children are gone, only the wind in the oaks abides.

He was sealed—no, his body was sealed—in a zinc box. How do the worms get in? Or do we each provide our own worms, carried along inside us? How much have they gnawed away by now? The bones will last a long time, and I suppose the clothes. I had gone through his closet and picked out a shirt and pants in his favorite colors. I imagine some of it was artificial fiber, and that lasts longer, doesn't it? I suppose the buckle on his belt will last a long time, too. Shoes? No, they gave me his shoes. He doesn't have shoes on.

I walk around the patch where he was buried, not over it nor onto it. Why do I do that? Walking on it seems like desecration. I begin to understand why humanity has regarded its burial grounds as sacred sites. Under each of these plots has been laid to rest what remained of one of God's images on earth, one of his icons. Those icon-remaains hallow this place.

I suppose if that's true, then the houses of the living are even more hallowed. If the resting places of the remains of God's icons deserve respect, then surely the dwelling places of his living icons do. The grass here is nicely mowed, the rolling hills lovely, splendid oaks, very peaceful. I suppose some of those buried here never lived so well.

I wonder how it will all go when God raises him and the rest of us from the dead? Giving us new bodies seems no great problem. But how is he going to fit us all together into his city? Eric here, man of the twentieth century, has to be fitted in with someone from long ago who lived in primitive conditions, knowing nothing of airplanes and electricity and neutron bombs, knowing only of the patch of soil which she tended and from which she never strayed more than five miles. Will God have everyone learn computers? Eric would have a head start. And what about the different characters and temperaments that all these people bring? Eric was loyal and gentle and loving, if sometimes a bit self-centered. Some people are nasty, ill-tempered, unpleasant to be around. How will God handle that? Seems to me there'll have to be a lot of purging first.

And so many, so innumerably many. I see them stretching way back, their faces eventually becoming just a brownish haze from here. Everybody is known by somebody in that crowd,
but the memories usually trail off somewhere so
that up front here we know only a very few.
God alone has them all in mind.

I don’t see how he’s going to bring it off.
But I suppose if he can create he can re-create.

I wonder if it’s all true? I wonder if he’s
really going to do it?

Will I hear Eric say someday, really now I
mean: “Hey Dad, I’m back”?

“But remember, I made all this, and raised
my Son from the dead, so. . . .”

OK. So goodbye Eric, goodbye, goodbye, until we see.