

DECEMBER 3

Hannah wept and would not eat. Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?" (1 Samuel 1:7-8)

The Isaiah texts called us to prepare and proclaim God's coming in the flesh. But why is God's incarnation so important, and what is it that we need from God?

This text from the first book of Samuel provides some clues. In the story, we meet Hannah, a woman who cannot have children. Wanting desperately to conceive, Hannah becomes despondent, crying and refusing to eat. Her concerned husband, Elkanah, asks her why she is so sad: even if she cannot have children, he reasons, she has him as a husband.

There is no doubt in this text that Hannah is suffering, and she suffers in a way that is familiar to many of us. One in ten Americans today have trouble conceiving or sustaining a pregnancy. But Hannah's story isn't poignant because it teaches us about infertility; it's poignant because it's a metaphor for suffering in general.

That makes it a story that we can all relate to.

Think of it this way: at a broad level, suffering is emptiness, death, or hopelessness where life and growth and hope ought to be. Suffering is particularly upsetting in situations where we hope for growth and

life but do not receive it. Hannah's experience is, in many ways, the literal embodiment of that: she expected her body to produce a new life. Instead, she found her body a place of emptiness. In that way, her suffering becomes a metaphor for the suffering that all of us experience when we find barrenness where life ought to be thriving.

Advent offers us an opportunity to think about suffering in this new way and to remember that God is coming to deliver us. Maybe that's why Christians use language like "new life" or "born again" to describe how God is at work in us. God promises that we do not suffer alone, that hope is possible even in our darkest hours, and that suffering does not go unredeemed. Just as Hannah receives a child of her own at the end of this story, so we will receive literal or metaphorical new life in the places we need it most.

REFLECT

Recall a moment of suffering in your life. How did you feel?

How has God breathed new life into you?

How can you help to end suffering in the lives of others?

DECEMBER 4

*Did not he who made me in the womb make them?
And did not one fashion us in the womb? (Job 31:15)*

Early in my ministry as a priest, a woman came to me for a pastoral conversation. She was very ill, but her identical twin was not.

“I don’t understand,” she said. “We look the same, and we come from the same family. So why did this happen to me?”

As a young priest, my initial instinct was to jump in with possible answers or to tell her what to believe about her own fears and challenges, but instead, I showed her this text from Job.

“Does this sound familiar?” I asked.

I told her that Job uttered these words as he tried to understand why God chose him to experience great suffering when other people did not. He was, after all, no different from them. He was formed in utero like every other human being and born in the same way other people are born. At the most basic level, he was no different from anyone else. So why should he experience such tremendous suffering?

This is one of the questions that motivate our Advent hope. We have explored how suffering is a form of emptiness where life ought to be. Here we learn that suffering has another characteristic: it’s arbitrary, and this arbitrariness can be haunting.

Our faith offers hope that neither the emptiness of suffering nor its arbitrariness will prevail. Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection tell of a God who refuses to allow an empty or senseless ending. This says something about God's role in our lives: God is a redeemer who will not let us experience suffering without giving meaning to it.

One of the reasons this Advent hope is so central to our faith is because of Jesus' own journey. His conception was miraculous, but he was formed and birthed in the same way as Job, and in the same way as the sick woman to whom I offered counsel. At this most basic level, he was like every other person.

Yet, because he was also God, Jesus became the bridge between God and humanity through which God experienced what life and suffering are like. In a personal way, God understood emptiness and arbitrariness of suffering. And God responded with the Resurrection as a sign that even the suffering of death would be given new meaning through the creation of new life.

REFLECT

Have you ever felt that suffering was arbitrary?

What kind of new life emerged from that suffering?

How can you help bring new life to others who suffer?