

Pentecost 3, Proper 8, Year A, 2014  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

A few weeks ago  
a new movie came out.  
That's nothing unusual - movies are released all the time -  
but this one  
is somewhat different.

"The Fault in our Stars"  
is about two teenagers  
with cancer.  
It's done surprisingly well at the box office,  
for a movie that deals, at least in part  
with something we all would prefer not to face,  
the reality of sickness  
and the fear of death.

I haven't seen it yet  
but the reviews  
are, on the whole,  
good -  
some suggest  
that the movie is a little more upbeat  
than life with cancer  
actually is,  
but at least it tries.

And part of the movie  
was filmed at an Episcopal Church,  
St Paul's in suburban Pittsburgh.

That led the Bishop of Pittsburgh, Dorsey McConnell  
to record a video  
reflecting on the movie and on his personal experience  
of cancer.

"I don't know why I got cancer." he says. "I don't know why I was unlucky to get sick any more  
than know why  
I was blessed to get well."

And as he talks on the video,

he tells of the struggle he had, the struggle he still has,  
 not so much with his own illness  
 but with the fact that, as he says,  
 “A lot of people get sick and stay sick.”

This week,  
 I’ve visited or spoken with  
 a number of parishioners  
 who have been struggling with health issues, their own  
 or of those who they love.  
 And they  
 came to my mind  
 as I read our psalm for today,  
 as did Bishop Dorsey McConnell’s  
 words.

Because in it, the psalmist is struggling with  
 the reality of suffering.

“How long, O LORD?”  
 the psalmist asks.  
 How long?  
 Will you forget me for ever?  
 How long will you hide your face from me?  
 How long shall I have perplexity in my mind,  
 and grief in my heart, day after day?  
 how long shall my enemy triumph over me?”

How long?

If you were to run a random poll of people  
 and ask what is the primary question they have about suffering,  
 I suspect the answer would be  
 “Why? Why does it happen? Why does God allow it?”  
 Those are big questions.

But I suspect that for those of us who are suffering - whether its cancer or another health issue  
 or something else entirely - for those of us who are suffering,  
 the question of why  
 recedes into the background.  
 Yes, it’s still there,  
 but in the pressure of getting through the next minute and hour and day,  
 the question that is foremost, especially to those of us of faith,

the question is  
“How long?  
How long, O Lord?”

They are words spoken  
by almost everyone who is suffering.  
From the trivial  
to the extreme.  
From something as simple  
as a sting from a yellow-jacket  
to grieving the death of someone we love.  
How long  
will this keep on hurting?

We want to know  
how long.  
Because if we know  
how long  
then we know  
there will be an end to it.  
One day.  
However distant.  
There will be an end.  
And in that  
lies hope.  
To use a cliché, it's the light at the end of the tunnel  
that makes the darkness  
bearable.

“How long,” the psalmist begs God, “how long?  
...Look upon me and answer me, O LORD my God;  
give light to my eyes, lest I sleep in death;

Just show me the light  
at the end of the tunnel  
and maybe, maybe,  
I can survive.

But of course  
what anyone who has suffered knows  
is that far too often  
there is no answer  
to the question of “how long?”

Sometimes  
we're lucky.  
We get an answer straight away.  
It will last this many hours or days  
or weeks.  
But more often  
the answer is less immediate,  
less defined.  
As long as it takes.  
Sometimes hours, sometimes days, sometimes years.

The psalmist voices our question,  
“How long?”

And then  
there's a shift.  
The first four verses are a plea to God,  
“How long?”

But then, just as happened in last week's psalm,  
there's a shift.  
Not so much like last week,  
when it was clear  
that God  
had entered  
the conversation, God has intervened.  
This time it seems simply  
that as he struggles with  
how long this suffering will last,  
the psalmist remembers  
how God has acted in the past.

“But I put my trust in your mercy.”  
I put my trust in your mercy.  
Because God  
has been merciful. Time and time again in Scripture  
we see how God has been merciful.  
How God has gone with the people  
through their struggles and suffering.  
With Noah,  
floating above a flooded world.  
With Abraham

on Mount Moriah.  
 With the people of God  
 in their Exodus from Egypt.

And as Christians, we know that God has continued to have mercy,  
 beyond the time of the psalmist,  
 God continued to have mercy  
 in Jesus Christ.

Going back to that video by Bishop Dorsey McConnell,  
 he speaks about the scene filmed in St Paul's Episcopal Church.  
 "There the [cancer] support group meets  
 in what they call the literal heart of Jesus. Yes, they sort of mock that setting  
 but they go there anyway.  
 And their lives  
 change.

What happens to them can happen to us.  
 In real life stories, like those in the "Fault of our Stars,"  
 we meet God...  
 These are not stories about a God who fixes everything  
 at least not now, not in this life. Like they say in Fault,  
 "The world is not a wish granting factory"  
 This is about a God who takes on our suffering  
 and walks a little in front of us,  
 calling us into his life.

That life is filled with love.  
 Jesus says, That is why he came among us.  
 He says, 'I have come that [you] may have life  
 and have it abundantly.'  
 We don't need to fear oblivion...The love of God  
 fills  
 oblivion...  
 "Nothing can make sense out of innocent suffering.  
 But the love of God can fill it,  
 redeem it,  
 and even bring forth life out of death.

"In the end...we're all waiting for healing.  
 We're waiting for the one who can bind up our conscience,  
 heal the wounds of our past, and point us toward a future that is bigger than we are.  
 And that one is the Christ.

And if we want to meet him,  
really meet him,  
then we have to look for him  
where he really is.

“[And when you do that]  
I’ll bet you will start to hear the voice of the God who calls to you,  
who has known you since before you were born,  
and who says to you “Follow me.”  
And if you do, I promise  
he will lead you  
in the love of your life.”  
There may be no answer  
to the question  
“how long?”  
but what there is,  
what there is  
in the midst of our suffering, in the midst of our questioning,  
in the midst of it all  
is God.

“I put my trust in your mercy;  
my heart is joyful because of your saving help.  
I will sing to the LORD, for he has dealt with me richly;  
I will praise the Name of the Lord Most High.”

And so the psalmist sings.  
Not because everything is better.  
But because God is there.

Leonard Cohen captures it well  
in the song  
Hallelujah,  
with its haunting refrain.

He begins with the king,  
King David,  
traditionally associated  
with the psalms.

Now I’ve heard there was a secret chord  
That David played, and it pleased the Lord  
But you don’t really care for music, do you?

It goes like this  
The fourth, the fifth  
The minor fall, the major lift  
The baffled king composing Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah  
Hallelujah, Hallelujah

How long, O LORD?  
How long?  
But I put my trust in your mercy.  
I will sing  
to the LORD.

I've seen your flag on the marble arch  
Love is not a victory march  
It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah  
Hallelujah, Hallelujah

How long, O LORD? How long?  
But I put my trust in your mercy.  
I will sing  
to the LORD.

It's not a cry you can hear at night  
It's not somebody who has seen the light  
It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah  
Hallelujah, Hallelujah

How long, O LORD? How long?  
But I put my trust in your mercy.  
I will sing  
to the LORD.

There's a blaze of light in every word  
It doesn't matter which you heard  
The holy or the broken Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah

How long, O LORD? How long?  
But I put my trust in your mercy.  
I will sing  
to the LORD.

And even though it all went wrong  
I'll stand before the Lord of Song  
With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah  
Hallelujah, Hallelujah

How long, O LORD? How long?  
But I put my trust in your mercy.  
I will sing  
to the LORD.

There are no easy answers  
when you're suffering.  
But as we cry to God  
"how long?"  
we sing to God  
Hallelujah.  
Sometimes broken,  
sometimes joyful,  
as our prayer book puts it,  
"even at the grave we make our song,  
Alleluia!  
Alleluia!  
Alleluia!"