

Bitter or Better?

The Presentation of the Lord

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‘If there is a God, why is there suffering?’ You probably have asked yourself that question before or have had others ask that question of you. If you’ve struggled to find an answer, don’t feel bad! This has been an ongoing question for centuries. While we may not be able to answer this question adequately and we cannot get rid of suffering, there is a question that we can answer: ‘what do we do with our suffering?’ We have two main options: allow it to make us bitter or allow it to make us better.

Responding to suffering by becoming bitter is very common. In a certain sense, we can’t blame people who become bitter because of their suffering. They are in pain, unhappy with life, and may even be the victim of injustice. But whenever we become a bitter person, we are hard to be around, angry at the world, and always playing the victim. That doesn’t get us anywhere. Thankfully, we don’t have to respond to our sufferings in that way.

Our faith teaches us that we can respond to our suffering in a different way, in a way that makes us better. All three of our readings this weekend touch on suffering, but then take it not in the ‘bitter’ direction, but in the ‘better’ direction.

In our first reading, *Malachi* speaks of the messenger of the Lord who will come into the world. He suggests that it will be a difficult day for the people, for ‘who can endure the day of his coming’ and ‘who can stand when he appears?’, he asks. But then *Malachi* qualifies the suffering by saying that it will be like the refiner’s fire. In other words, it will be a

purifying suffering, one that takes away the parts of us that need to go anyway and will make us refined as silver or gold.

Then, in our second reading from *Hebrews*, we hear of the suffering of Jesus. But this was a suffering that made him more empathetic to the sufferings of others. As the letter summarizes, “because he himself was tested through what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.” Like Jesus, when we’ve been through our own sufferings, we can then help others get through theirs.

Finally, in our Gospel from *Luke*, we hear the story of the presentation of Jesus in the Temple. After saying many good things about the child Jesus to Mary and Joseph, Simeon gives an additional message to Mary: “behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted- and you yourself a sword will pierce- so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.” Mary would have to suffer by watching her son die on the cross. But, by doing so, Mary allowed her suffering to become redemptive. Like Mary, whenever we connect our sufferings to the cross of Christ, we, too, are participating in the mystery of salvation.

Do I let my suffering make me bitter or better?

We cannot answer the question why suffering, but we can choose how we respond to it.