

Suffering and incarnation: Psalm 8; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

by [Michael A. King](#) in the [May 18, 2010](#) issue

Not surprisingly, given that they are selected for Trinity Sunday, today's texts point to God-in-three. The good news is that the juxtapositions seem organic, a legitimate highlighting of multiple aspects of the divine.

Psalm 8 celebrates God the Creator and his creatures. "O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens." How puny we are in comparison, yet the psalmist subverts our expectations and announces that we are—not humans-as-barely-more-than-dust—but "a little lower than God," or "a little lower than the angels" and "crowned . . . with glory and honor."

But what about sin? What about the fate, that of Icarus plummeting on melted wings, that we seem regularly to suffer if we take being *almost* angels too literally? I can imagine making it through life on Psalm 8—but only if I'd never left my twenties. I remember some achievements, of trying to fly as far as human wings can go. Yet I am also haunted, now that I'm in late midlife, by memories of visions that were too large for any mortal, of a confidence that was sometimes too strong for frail flesh.

So I turn gratefully to Jesus Christ, the second face of God, because I have learned, with Paul in Romans 5, of the human need for even those just lower than angels to be "justified by faith" so as to have "peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul captures us with his readiness to boast even "in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope."

In his suffering Jesus offers the gift of incarnation, of that divine tent pitched among us. Often we get the meaning of the cross only when, after responding to Jesus' invitation to take up our crosses and pledging allegiance to him, we take on the suffering that follows. We may find that when we suffer for our faith, being faithful shifts from being something bloodless or vapid to something bloody and terrible—and very real.

John Howard Yoder insists that the only suffering we should see as connected with Christ's cross is the suffering caused by actively chosen faithfulness, not the suffering we endure because of "a difficult family situation . . . a frustration of . . . personal fulfillment, a crushing debt." Yoder is theologically correct. What Paul has in view is suffering that comes our way because of our faith. Paul seems to boast not of our depressions, our feelings wounded by life's usual stings, or our griefs over the losses of advancing age.

But the divisions between suffering as part of our commitment to Christ and everyday personal suffering seem less tidy. Many of us experience both types of suffering and find that each produces endurance, which yields character. Suffering of any kind, endured with integrity, humbles yet ennobles us, and teaches us how God might simultaneously manifest both glory and slavery (1 Phil. 2).

Suffering may also be a doorway into life in the Holy Spirit. As their father reached his last days, members of a family formed a delegation to talk with him about signing a Do Not Resuscitate order. In a cracked whisper, the father responded to their explanation with, "It all happened so fast." His loved ones weren't sure what had happened so fast. Did he mean their explanation of the DNR? Finally they realized that he meant *life*—that life had happened so fast. Then they could almost see, right before their eyes, the baby bouncing into life, the shy child brushed with first love, the strong adult, their own lives passing swiftly.

All of us know ordinary suffering. All of us must somehow negotiate the end of life of those we love and even of ourselves. Yet we know cross-suffering too, because there are choices to be made, here in our death-prolonging culture—some that are congruent with the cross, some less so.

I've been blessed to witness life and death, faithful choices bringing torment, wrong choices bringing costs it seems no human should have to bear. So often, exactly when only suffering seems to fill the windshield, the onrushing light turns out not to be catastrophe, but hope. The room fills with light. It may not be a light that would register on a camera, but it is there.

Do we begin to grasp what Jesus means when he says that he will have "many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now"? Post-Easter, post-Pentecost, post-Cornelius, post-Jerusalem Council—all give us clues. Yet often we can't bear what the Spirit is revealing. Often it's through suffering that the way of Jesus becomes incarnate, when life takes us where we wouldn't choose to go. Then, when

we breach the limits of our human resources, we encounter, as Romans 5:5 puts it, “God’s love . . . poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”