If there is one question that is the most difficult question for people of faith, it has to be this: why is there suffering in the world? To borrow Rabbi Kushner’s question, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” Why do the people you would least expect to be blessed with all the trappings of success have so much and the people you would think would be blessed beyond measure go without so much? Why do children get cancer and why do too many of them die? Why are young people killed in car accidents and usually around the happiest moments and events in their young lives?

The twenty-five cent word for this question is **theodicy**. The task of theodicy is to provide a defense of God’s goodness and omnipotence in view of the existence of evil. How does evil exist in a world created by and infused with a good Creator? The debate has raged for as long as people have been aware of God. And the answers are enough to make your head spin!

Now, if we wanted to be here until about this time next week, we could make our way through all of the arguments. And at the end of the week, I’m not sure that we would have any more of an answer or any better of an answer than we might have going into the enterprise. If you think there’s a definitive answer, think again. If you think there’s an answer that will completely satisfy the inquiring mind, you’re wrong.

My hunch is that the problem of evil has less to do with God and more to do with what we – as human beings – are willing to allow. My hunch is that the reason evil exists in the world is largely due to what we – you and I – are willing to allow and what we are willing to prevent. The evil of hunger exists in the world, not because God doesn’t provide, but because we are not willing to share. The evil of poverty exists in our
world for no other reason than we want to protect what we have and the fear of not having what we have can make us do some pretty amazing things. The evil of incurable illnesses exists because we would rather spend the money needed to discover cures on other things and leave research into cancer, heart disease, and other diseases to be funded by the economic equivalent of a bake sale. God takes the rap for a lot of the evil that we allow and perpetuate in the world today.

The question we can deal with is this: when the tough times come, how do we respond? When the news from the doctor isn’t good, how do we move on? When days are lived in shadows and anxiety, doubt, and fear fill our lives, how can we continue to be people of faith?

I knew a man whose fiancé became ill and died before they could be married. He became so angry with God that he walked away from the faith and has never returned. I know of a great expert on the Bible and the Bible’s history whose belief in God was turned to skepticism because of the question of suffering. He now calls himself an agnostic.

Let’s be perfectly honest: these times that try our souls can be times when faith slips like sand through our fingers. We try, but we can’t pray, we can’t read scripture, we can’t find the strength or the confidence to practice our faith as we have in the past. God and the things of God seem far away – unapproachable and unavailable.

When those times come, let me assure you that you are not alone. Throughout the scriptures, there are those times when God’s people have felt God being absent. What better place can we turn for evidence that the opening verses of Psalm 22:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

So profoundly and perfectly did those words express the loneliness of such times, that when the gospel writer came to pen his story of Jesus’ death, he placed those words on the Savior’s lips. Forsaken, abandoned, cast off – these are normal feelings during times when we struggle with life.

It was in 1969, that Elizabeth Kubler-Ross wrote her now famous book, “On Death and Dying.” In that book, Dr. Kubler-Ross identified five stages through which people seem to move as they deal with death and dying. Those stages are:

- Denial and isolation
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Acceptance

Others have added additional steps to the process, but they are generally amplifications of the original five.
The point is we all go through these some of, if not most of, these stages. We all want to be left alone. We all get angry. We all try to strike that bargain with our doctors and God: “if you’ll do this, I’ll do that.” We all fall into the depths. It’s normal. It’s expected. And it’s okay.

When those times come, it’s good to have people who understand and will let you be who you are and go through what you are going through. There is one of the blessings of being part of a community of faith. During the toughest times of life, we feel that circle of caring surrounding us and carrying us through the hardest times. We know that there are those who are praying for us, even when we can’t pray for ourselves. We know that there are those who are doing those things we can’t do for ourselves – from the simple things of preparing a meal, to the more difficult tasks of life, which we may too tired or overwhelmed to manage. We know that there are those whose hearts are as broken as our own, but who can still manage to move through life and are willing to carry us along.

And then, there comes the day when we begin to function again. We begin to look to our faith to sustain us. We begin to rely on God to see us through. We “see the rainbow through the rain,” as the old hymn puts it. We rediscover that God is with us and that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love.

I love the way that Paul puts it in his Second Letter to the Corinthians:

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

Imagine a time when serious – even terminal – illness can be a time of renewal and rediscovery. It seems counterintuitive, but I’ve seen it happen again and again. Even though the days are filled with doctor’s appointments, therapies, treatments, and consultations, faith begins to emerge, like spring flowers from beneath the winter’s snow.

The outer, physical nature is under attack, but the inner, spiritual nature is growing and flourishing. We feel God’s presence in new ways – different ways – sometimes even better ways. We relax into God’s sustaining presence. We rediscover our smile and our laugh. Just when we thought none of the faith that once was ours was still available, on closer inspection, we find it growing and on the rise.
I knew a woman who was in the throes of a terminal cancer. She had lived a long and glorious life. She was a woman of great faith. But, when the diagnosis came, she withdrew and hardly engaged in life at all. When I would visit her, she would sit in silence. You could see her soul and spirit in turmoil. Then, one day, I went to visit her and she greeted me at the door with a smile. She was dressed in a bright dress and had an even brighter scarf covering her bald head. She ushered me into her sitting room, where she had prepared tea and cookies. She talked, uninterrupted, for nearly a half-an-hour. It was like the dam had burst. She laughed. She cried. And when she took a break, I asked her what had happened to change her so. She told me, “I took stock of what I had believed all my life and said, ‘None of that has changed. Let’s get on with it.’”

Does it always happen like that? No, not always. But the point is, it can. The point is that when we least expect it, we rediscover that our faith is still there. Maybe it’s been a little dormant. Maybe it’s gotten a little battered and bruised in the skirmishes in which we’ve been engaged. Maybe it’s not the same faith with which we entered the battle. But it’s faith and it’s still there.

And even then, there is a circle of caring, surrounding us and supporting us as we move through the most difficult of those times. The faith of those around us can inspire our own faith. The strength of fellow believers can strengthen us when we move through grief and dying.

At Services of Witness to the Resurrection, I often tell the story of John Quincy Adams. When that remarkable American was turning eighty years old, he was hobbling down the street one day in his favorite city of Boston, leaning heavily on a cane. Suddenly a friend slapped him on the shoulder and said, "Well, how's John Quincy Adams this morning?"

The old man turned slowly, smiled, and said, "Fine, sir, fine! But this old tenement that John Quincy lives in is not so good. The underpinning is about to fall away. The thatch is all gone off the roof, and the windows are so dim John Quincy can hardly see out anymore. As a matter of fact, it wouldn't surprise me if before the winter's over he had to move out. But as for John Quincy Adams, he never was better ... never was better!"

With this he started hobbling on down the street, believing without a shadow of doubt that the real John Quincy Adams was not a body that you could ever enclose in a casket or inter in a grave.

It’s that kind of faith – that deep-rooted trust and confidence in God’s presence and compassion – that can be ours. On closer inspection, we may even find that it is already there. It just needs a little care, like a springtime garden after a long and bruising winter. It needs a little re-energizing and a little nourishment. It needs to have what is no longer of value trimmed back and care needs to be given for what remains.

Faith that sustains us through the toughest times. Faith that carries us through the days of shadows and fears. Faith that finds expression in the love and care of those who surround us and carry us through whatever we face. Faith – for now and evermore. Amen.