

# Solidarity in Suffering

GRACE SPENCER<sup>1</sup>

*Our journey is a long day's journey of the Saturday. Between suffering, aloneness, unutterable waste on the one hand and the dream of liberation, of rebirth on the other.* —George Steiner<sup>2</sup>

I love spring. The neighborhood feels different during this season. The longer days invite kids to fill the once-empty front yards. Laughter breaks forth in the streets. We embrace winter because of spring, knowing that flowers will bloom again, confident that the sun will shine on our faces soon, holding onto the promise that the storm will eventually cease. Budding trees are signposts of new life. The wind whispers of what is coming—joy is just on the horizon. When we put seeds into the soil and fruit springs up from the ground, it feels like the fulfillment of a promise, like hope realized. I love that about this season.

Like the seasons, life in the neighborhood has a rhythm to it, and I am constantly oscillating between hope and despair, joy and sorrow . . . Spring is here now, but it's been a long winter. When I first moved into the neighborhood, I quickly became aware of the suffering of my neighbors—adults working for well under minimum wage because they were undocumented; teenagers who've had eight math teachers in one year; parents who can't afford the medical treatment their child needs. This year, I became one with them in their suffering.

It began last summer when I visited a Stations of the Cross hidden among forest trees in Oakhurst, California and prayed that I would be able to face death in faith, as Jesus had. Ironically, during my time of devotion I contracted Lyme disease. Not even two weeks of suffering went by before I begged God to let this cup pass from me. As my symptoms worsened, I watched my dreams slip through my fingers: I could hardly eat; I experienced pain in every place of my body; and I felt as though my brain could no longer process information. Once I realized my doctor had no solution, paralyzing anxiety crept in tempting me to envision the worst possible scenarios—would I ever finish

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<sup>2</sup> Steiner, *Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say?* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 231–32.

seminary, work as a missionary in another country, or even write again? I was face-to-face with my finitude and could hardly stand to look at it. I felt alone, abandoned, like God was sleeping through my suffering. I started to wonder if I even mattered. Why wasn't God healing me? Why wouldn't he even give me an explanation if not the cure? Was my life that insignificant?

I now know that Christ was present throughout my suffering—I was just listening for the wrong voice. While I was demanding answers, waiting for some dramatic gesture or miracle, God was whispering, "I know, Grace. I see you, I am with you, and I understand." God surrounded me with a loving community, including people who knew a lot about Lyme, whose support sustained me as I completed another year of seminary. This experience and God's faithfulness helped me understand that living a life of compassion is not about being the hero but about living in solidarity.

This last year I learned how to do that, to live in solidarity. I don't know if God was behind my suffering or in front of it, but I know he's been in it. There is a seventh grader in my neighborhood who is losing his eyesight, and the doctors don't have a diagnosis or treatment plan for him. As we've shared our pain, fears, and frustration with each other, holiness has dwelled between us. The way this boy joyously endures suffering, and acknowledges his anxiety about the future without allowing it to consume him amazes me. Together we're learning how to carry on through life without gripping it so tightly.

As we approached Easter this year, I decided to do a Stations of the Cross with our junior high students because I've experienced much of our journey with Jesus feeling like Good Friday—drowning in despair, wondering if the Father has forsaken us. Our prayers sometimes feel less like conversations and more like monologues; our circumstances cause our words to flow out in protest rather than devotion. I had been with a few of these students months earlier when their mom shared the news that she would be moving in with her boyfriend and would be leaving them with their grandma. Our path with Jesus leads us to the desolate Saturday—we find ourselves in the trenches, wandering through canyons, suddenly face-to-face with injustice and the complexity of life on the margins.

Yet even in the middle of winter, we await the arrival of spring. Eventually the days will get longer, and the warmer weather will allow the opportunity for things like ice cream dates. When I told some of the teenage girls in my neighborhood I was taking them to get ice cream at Baskin-Robbins, one of them said, "OH MY GOSH. Grace, I love you! Well, I loved you before, too." Winter fades into the background as we roll down the windows and sing as loud as we possibly can, embarrassing the cars next to us and ourselves.

Sometimes our mission feels like Sunday—our suffering is but a thread in the tapestry of God’s redemptive story. Recently, two of the students who have been waking up every Wednesday to go to Bible study with me before school told me they want to get baptized. As followers of Jesus, we get to celebrate the resurrection; hope is within our gaze. I wonder if baptism is just as much for the community of believers as it is for the ones being dunked. As they make a public commitment to follow Jesus, those of us oscillating between hope and despair swing to hope, witnessing the work of Jesus in our midst. When they emerge from the water and inhale the first breath of new life, we experience God’s immanence and remember his willingness to suffer with us.

Like the disciples who misunderstood Jesus’s death predictions, we misrepresent our mission when we focus solely on the resurrection. God does not swoop us up from death or help us escape suffering; the cross is not a talisman against misfortune in this life. Rather, God enters into our human situation and disarms death by submitting to it. God in human flesh is outside of everything we thought we wanted in a savior. The incarnation points to a God who is so passionately in love with and committed to his creatures that he would die to be with them. This is where new life begins—“suffering made audible and visible produces hope, articulated grief is the gate of newness, and the history of Jesus is the history of entering into the pain and giving it a voice.”<sup>3</sup> The climax of God’s redemptive story emerges from this sacrifice, from this story of painful solidarity. His mission of restoring wholeness becomes our mission when we choose to embrace vulnerability; we can share the pain of others because he shares our pain.

We are invited to live in the tension—death precedes the resurrection; winter ushers in spring, and when spring is on the forefront, winter follows closely behind. As followers of Jesus, we should know, to use Michael Gorman’s words, that the cross is the shape and source of our salvation.<sup>4</sup> We are most human, feel the most alive, and reflect the image of the Divine most clearly, when our actions emulate the loving actions of Jesus that led to the cross. We follow a God who, in Jesus, met us in radical solidarity. He took on flesh and dwelled among us (John 1:14), emptied himself of his divine prerogative (Eph 2:7), embraced finitude, nearly starved in a desert, wept over injustice, and ultimately redeemed the world through his death. New life blooms out of solidarity

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3 Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001), 88.

4 Michael J. Gorman, *The Death of the Messiah and the Birth of the New Covenant: A (Not So) New Model of the Atonement* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014).

in suffering—God’s solidarity with us and ours with others—if we’re willing to take up our cross.