The other day, September 4th to be exact the person we remembered on the official Episcopal Church Calendar was a guy named Paul Jones. Not John Paul Jones, the great Revolutionary War Naval Captain nor the bass player for Led Zepplin but rather the first Episcopal Bishop of Utah. Don’t worry if you have not heard of him, I had to look him up. The story was interesting not because of the life of Paul Jones but rather because of how it showed in stark relief what was important in the Episcopal Church one hundred years ago versus what is important now. The quick story is that Paul Jones became Missionary Bishop of Utah in 1914. In 1917 he made a speech saying that war was unchristian and in 1918 he resigned his bishopric under pressure for these controversial views. And so, by the fact that he is now commemorated on the church calendar means that in the one hundred or so years that have passed we have gone from saying war is justifiable as Christians to saying we should celebrate those who say war is antithetical to Christianity. Before I go on, I want to say that in today’s sermon I am not really interested in saying who I think is right – the Episcopal Church then or the Episcopal Church now, but simply want to point out that depending on which way societal winds are blowing Christian doctrine can be very malleable. What was groovy one hundred years ago in Christian circles is now seen as backwards and in need of condemnation, meaning that while Christians would like to think of themselves as standing over culture applying only the true teachings of Jesus, the fact of the matter is we often shoehorn Christian doctrine into whatever is deemed acceptable by society at the time. I don’t think this is a conspiracy but rather just part of human nature. We like what we like and condemn what we don’t. Because the thing is we can move Christian doctrine around while still paying heed to the precepts of God. And the way we do this is by emphasizing certain things found in the Bible while ignoring others. For example, in popular culture these days Jesus is often portrayed as a man of peace. So, we have a lot of emphasis on the “my peace I leave with you” part of the Gospel and not much emphasis on, “I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Jesus said both things and by ignoring one or the other you can create certain perceptions that may or may not be true.

And our readings today touch on some of the things that often get ignored in the more therapeutic version of Christianity that we practice these days. In Isaiah today we hear, “I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.” Jesus today “began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed.” Suffering is not real in vogue these days. Which may lead you to ask was suffering ever really in vogue? Why, yes it was. Take for example Simeon Stylites who lived in the fifth century. For 37 years he sat on a small platform on the top of a pillar near Aleppo in modern day Syria. He lived to be around 69, meaning that he spent over half of his life perched on top of a pillar. Now as you might guess the top of a pillar comes with no HVAC nor does it offer any protection from the elements – the scorching sun, rain or snow. I suspect that most modern people would say that sitting perched atop a pillar is a ridiculous thing to do and they might be right but, at the same time, it does take the idea of suffering seriously. It does admit that there is suffering and that it might be able to teach us something. So, what are we as Christians to think about suffering? Do we actively seek it like Simeon or do we avoid it at all costs believing Jesus came not to bring a sword but a Barcalounger? Well, what follows is my opinion but I don’t think it is that far out there. It is partially based on the behavior I occasionally witness in parking lots so it has to be legitimate.

Have you ever noticed that sometimes in parking lots people will circle around for minutes on end trying to find a space that will help them avoid an extra 25 seconds of walking? They spend five minutes trying to avoid 25 seconds, spending more time trying to save time. And it is not just parking lots where we see such behavior, I had a friend in college who would spend hours trying to find the most obscure paper he could on a certain subject driving as far as the libraries at Stanford or Berkely so that he could then plagiarize it. This was in the days before the internet and easily searchable databases so you could get away with it. When you look at the math, he spent more time cheating than he would have had he just sat down and written the paper. But such mismatches are sort of similar to our relationship to suffering. We can spend so much time trying to avoid suffering that we make things worse or at least more involved. So, my theory is we don’t need to go and actively seek suffering like Simeon but we also need to realize that there is suffering in this life and that it can instruct us when it comes. Suffering can be a very valuable teacher. Not a fun teacher but a valuable one. Some will suffer much worse like those we left behind in Afghanistan and others suffering will be more minor but it is suffering nonetheless and really I am not sure if it matters all that much what the suffering looks like.

Years ago, I read a book by Jerry Sittser called *A Grace Disguised*. The book was about a tragedy in the author’s life where in an automobile accident a drunk driver killed his wife, his mother and his daughter – three generations gone in an instant. He said that afterward people would play a sort of grief Olympics wherein they would say that his grief must be worse than someone who only lost one person. His response was interesting. He basically said that we cannot rank grief and sorrow. It is not mathematical equation or a chemistry mixture where three generations of family gone gives you three times the grief and sorrow. We all suffer and while we may be able to rank it in terms of how bad things went, we cannot rank how individuals react to that loss. Grief and suffering will come to all in some shape or another. But Sittser also says this about our reaction to the suffering and tragedy that will inevitably come into our lives. He says “The quickest way for anyone to reach the sun and the light of day is not to run west, chasing after the setting sun, but to head east, plunging into the darkness until one comes to the sunrise.”

I don’t wish suffering or grief or pain on anyone but at the same time I know that it comes to everyone. There is an old joke that at an Italian funeral everyone cries, everyone mourns, everyone wails and then it is over. Whereas at a Norwegian funeral no one cries, no one mourns and no one wails and it is never over. We worship a God who has brought healing through his suffering. Similarly, God can bring healing from our suffering. As I said it is not always fun but it beats fleeing from it; running from every possibility that something may go wrong and living in constant fear. We will all come out of this world with scars but those scars can help us to grow and help us to bring healing to ourselves and others this day and forevermore.