

## **Pain and Suffering**

By Pastor Jim Preisig

Next week our 16-year-old niece, Deanna, is coming for a visit. Her father, Chet, is dying of ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease). Chet is in his early 50's and no longer able to even stand or provide the most rudimentary care for himself. A lifelong athlete who competed in national volleyball tournaments and kayaking competitions, this dread disease has cruelly robbed him of the physical vigor that was his signature. His world is shrinking rapidly into terminal confinement in a body without muscle tone. He can now barely swallow; soon he will be unable to breathe.

Deanna's visit will afford her a respite from the heartbreaking routine of caring for a father that is dying. The norm that she is experiencing is one that no child should ever need to endure, and yet they do. It is our intention to offer her the comfort and solace of a family that loves and cares, laughs and cries; for I know that Deanna will bring with her the painful questions of faith that a daughter holds in her heart when her father is dying.

When faced with the cruel realities of life, Job's friends suggested that he curse God and die. Refusing to do so, Job instead railed against God, giving full vent to his rage, frustration and despair. In response, according to scripture, the Almighty asked Job if he was able to comprehend. God asks, "Were you there when I created the earth? Do you know where Light comes from and where Darkness lives? Can you find your way to where lightning is launched, or the place from which the wind blows?" According to the Message, a great contemporary Bible translation, Job could only answer, "I'm speechless, in awe – words fail me. I'm ready to shut up and listen."

With Job, I must confess that I struggle with the imponderable questions and have no pat answers. I realize that if all of this was comprehensible to me, it would be far too simplistic to balance the subtle intricacies of life and creation. So I don't know why children suffer and die; why nations are torn by earthquakes, hurricanes and tsunamis; why evil so often seems to prosper and goodness languish in defeat; why a good soul dies too soon and a bad one lives to be aged.

What I do know is that the God we worship does not cause pain or suffering, and is never indifferent to the cries of His children. Aristotle wrote that God is "the unmoved mover." Abraham Heschel, the great Jewish theologian of the last century, said that God is "the most moved mover." The New Testament of our faith simply tells us that "God is love." And God loves us enough to tolerate our rage and frustration, and then calms our hearts and soothes our spirits with His love.

Even in the midst of sorrow and suffering, God is with us. God is experienced in the moments of calm that sustain us in the time of storms, the comforting touch of a sister, the tears of a brother, the laughter of a child, the quiet gorgeous beauty of a sunset, the simple meal shared with dear friends. In all these things we experience the love of God. It is in worship, in prayer and as we read His Word that God's comforting voice is heard. And His grace becomes sufficient.

It is often only in retrospect that we recognize God's hand upon our hearts and lives. We look back on the heartbreaking times only to realize that God was speaking most lovingly in those moments of greatest pain. Remembering those God moments in the past gives us comfort in the present and hope for the future. Paul said that we are more than conquerors in Christ. When our faith is tested and found true, we finally

believe it with confidence. It may take days, or months, or years, but God is patient and true to His Word. He loves you.