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*All Saints' Church, Chevy Chase, Maryland  
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Jeremiah 29.11-13

Romans 10.8-11

John 14.1-6

A warm welcome to all who have come here today. I am not the rector of All Saints'; I am its resident theologian. The title may be off-putting. What theology is really about, though, is reflection on the deep questions of life in the light of revelation, revelation as attested in Scripture. And surely such reflection is called for today, when we are gathered in memory and celebration of the life of Ruth Bryant. For her life poses deep questions, perhaps above all that of suffering, the condition which is so prevalent in the world today and which we necessarily encounter in our own lives, in some fashion or other. But her life does more than pose the question, indeed much more. As seen through the lens of Scripture, specifically of Job and the Suffering Servant, it points to the possibility of triumphing over suffering, of trusting in the Lord even while we are unable to account for it. And in this way Ruth brought us a very great treasure.

I cannot speak of Ruth as a family member, as others have just done (and in so doing have made me rather wistful). Nor am I a friend of long standing. But I did know her—and probably like you have not yet adjusted to her bodily absence. I knew her principally through her attendance at the midday Wednesday Eucharist which I celebrate, to which she came as long as she could. I knew her also through visiting her thereafter, in hospital, rehab, nursing home, and back in her apartment. These visits involved not only conversation but also prayer, mutual prayer. And of the things I know, I am bound to speak.

I have noted her suffering. Apparently this was a life-long matter. As a child, even as an infant, she was afflicted by severe genetic disorders with persisting consequences. It would have been nice if this affliction had been offset by an enduring and happy marriage and family life. But such was not to be. Instead she was confronted with that most daunting of situations: finding herself a single parent responsible for child-rearing but with only meager resources. And latterly, as those outside her family also know, she suffered general debility, extreme fragility, and unremitting pain.

I cite these things not to arouse pity, but because only in their light can we appreciate her responses to them. I know little about her childhood, but the main thing was that by dint of effort and much courage she succeeded in compensating for her disabilities. About her success in coping with family separation and single parenthood I have little information either—except that the devotion which she inspired in children and grandchildren is manifest here today. But I do know the manner in which she confronted her afflictions in old age. And there must have been anticipations of it in the previous phases of her life.

As for the nature of this manner, she came to our Wednesday Eucharist, as I said, as long as she could. But it was with difficulty, and even then only through the assistance of a singularly selfless member of the congregation. But her difficulty did not make her less receptive to the service. On the contrary, her responsiveness to the liturgy, to receiving the sacramental bread and wine, even to my poor preaching, was obvious. It was evident also that for her, Christ was really present in the Eucharist; that the past event of his passion,

death, and resurrection became present reality. In the prayers for her healing in which I shared, her openness to the Lord's will, whatever it might be, was always apparent. Not only that, it was never for herself only that she had us pray. It was always also for others. Nor was she dismayed by the slowness with which the Lord might seem to be responding to our petitions. And for my visits, which to my lasting regret were less frequent than she deserved, she was unfailingly grateful. Others I think would have reproached me, however subtly, for not coming more often. But from her there was never a hint of that.

She did not have answers, at least not explicit ones, to the question of her suffering, of its continuing throughout her life even into old age. She herself asked why it should be. How then could she respond to it with the spirit that she did, remaining always open to the Lord and open to others? The key is to be found, I think, in the book of Job, one of the great accounts in Scripture of similarly unmerited suffering. You will recall how Job, who was both prosperous and upstanding, finds all his possessions and even his health taken away from him. In the wake of this he and his friends contend endlessly over how it is to be accounted for. He enters into contention even with the Lord. But in the end, as the Lord speaks to him out of the whirlwind, though still without explicit answers he confesses the inadequacy of his understanding and repents in dust and ashes. I think that Ruth, without articulating it, in her consideration of her own situation came out in a similar place. In her suffering she realized that even without knowing the answers she was called to go on trusting the Lord. And the outcome of her trust was the presence of Christ in her life, so that his power could and did sustain her. What our reading from Romans speaks of was thus a reality for her.

The Word is near you, on your lips and in your ears...because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

In just this fashion Jesus as the Word was near Ruth.

What I have spoken of may make her life meaningful in its own terms. But what of its further meaning, its meaning also for us? Does this exist too? I believe it does and that it is to be found in another great Scriptural account of unmerited suffering, the song of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah. In this we read, among other things

He had no form or comeliness that we should look at him,  
and no beauty that we should desire him.  
He was despised and rejected by men,  
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

But it continues:

But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities.  
Upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,  
and with his stripes we are healed.

This passage was picked up by the New Testament writers as the figure of Christ, of his suffering and the redemption it wrought for us. It was picked up also in our own time by Martin Luther King. In commenting on the assassination of President Kennedy and the remarkable sense of national unity that followed, he said, "Unmerited suffering can be redemptive." So also Ruth's suffering, and her life of steadfastness in the face of it, can be redemptive, not only for her children but also for us as we reflect on it, and are inspired by it,

and find our own shortcomings resolved in it. Further, we can see in it the fulfilment of our Jeremiah reading

For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

Despite all appearances to the contrary, the Lord had a plan for Ruth.

Finally, her life bears witness that Jesus, in whom she put her trust, is indeed the way and the truth and the life. For it was through him that she came to the Father. And for this we give eternal thanks and praise.

The Rev. Theodore L. Lewis