Class #3: Lent-Holy Week

**Suffering and Crucifixion**

Required Readings: Buttrick, Ch. 4; Moltmann, Ch. IV/1-4 (pp. 151-195); Hickman, et al., Ch. 6/A-H.

Suggested Readings: Park; McCarroll.

Introduction to the Season of Lent

In Western Christianity, Lent, as the forty days before Easter, begins on Ash Wednesday and ends before Easter Sunday (technically 46 days, as Sundays are not included in the count).[[1]](#footnote-1) It was included in the Easter cycle in the 4th Century in the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) as a time of preparation for Easter. Lent is generally understood both as the period of the church’s catechetical teaching for those preparing for baptism and confirmation and as the period of penitential discipline of Christians.

Originally, Lent was the time of preparation for the resurrection event rather than the crucifixion. It is related to Easter not Good Friday. Christ’s sufferings and death on the cross should be understood from the perspective of the Easter celebration of God’s triumph over sin and death. That is why the RCL readings during the Lent season are not penitential but covenantal. The liturgical color of the season is purple except Holy Week. Purple is not a color of penitence. In the ancient world, purple was the color of royalty, since only a royal income could afford the dye that made it possible. Purple during the Lent season, then, points to the kingship of Christ.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The major theological theme of Lent is the renewal of God’s promise through the suffering and death of Christ from the point of view of the resurrection of Christ. Such theological sub-themes as penitence and the participation in Christ’s sufferings in Lent also need to be explored from this eschatological viewpoint.

When we reflect on the sufferings and death of Christ for the sermons in Lent, we have some fundamental theological questions: Why did Jesus Christ have to die and suffer? How does his sufferings and death relate to our salvation? In relation to these questions, our reading on Moltmann helps us deepen our theological understanding. Let me first summarize his responses to these theological questions and then invite you to reflect on them.

Why did Jesus Christ have to Suffer and Die?

Moltmann interprets the sufferings and death of Jesus Christ as the indictment of human sins in history. The trial and death of Jesus Christ demonstrate that Jesus of Nazareth was a victim of the human history in some respects: First, Jesus was a victim of human politics under the Roman despotic rule over Israel. Although he did not call for a revolt against Rome, his proclamation of the kingdom of God and Messianic activities were a public threat to the Romans who had ruled Israel with unjust despotism (164). Jewish religious leaders also realized the danger of his ministry against the status quo. Jesus’ title hung on his cross, “king of the Jews,” reveals this political accusation of the powerful.

Second, Jesus died as a victim of the unjust social structure. He suffered the fate of a slave in his society. He was one of the slaves, the oppressed, and the powerless masses. He was the poorest of the poor in his time. As a slave, his life was disposable for the ruling class. They tortured, abused, and crucified him, ignoring his human rights without going through the legitimate legal process.

Last, Jesus’ death exemplifies a cosmic destruction. His death was the sign of a tragedy in creation. Under the Roman imperialism, all living things in the colony—nature and humans—were objects of exploitation. They were ruined and destroyed. As a person of a Roman colony, Jesus’ life was subjected to, possessed and dominated by the oppressors. In the eyes of the Roman imperialists, Jesus’ life was not valuable to be cared. Every creature in the land of Israel including nature as well as human lives was under the fate of destruction. In this sense, Jesus’ death, states Moltmann, is not merely his private and personal destiny. Rather, “Jesus died the death of all living things. He died not only ‘the death of the sinner’ or merely his own ‘natural death.’ He died in solidarity with the whole sighing creation, human and non-human (169).” Therefore, according to Moltmann, Jesus had to suffer and die as a victim of political, social, and cosmic evil powers.

While the traditional concept of sin is limited to the individual moral and psychological misbehavior as Augustine understood, Moltmann helps us define human sin in a broader dimension in relation to the political, social, and cosmic evil powers. That is, sin means not only our personal moral misbehavior or individual crimes but also social, political, and cosmic acts of violence which bring all living things to death. In other words, sin means “Godlessness and an act of violence (209).” Sin as “Godlessness and an act of violence” has been committed in the world. When we look squarely at our reality, we realize injustice of economic and political systems, scientific and technological exploitation of nature, and the system of nuclear deterrent victimizing the poor and weak, animals and vegetable species, and the whole world, particularly in the developing countries. In their sufferings and death, we find the evil powers, the sins, that crucified Jesus two thousand years’ ago.

Salvific Meaning of Christ’s Suffering and Death

How, then, can the sufferings and death of Christ which is the result of the human sin have the redemptive meaning? The traditional theological answer to this question is based on the Pauline faith statement. Paul the Apostle says that, “...while we still were sinners, Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God (Rom. 5:8-9).[[3]](#footnote-3) These verses have been used by the church to emphasize that our sins have been forgiven by the blood of Jesus shed on the cross and that Jesus’ sufferings and death have a salvific meaning as the vicarious sacrifice of our sins.

This Pauline statement, however, raises a theological question, What does “justification by the blood of Jesus Christ” mean? According to Moltmann, the historical fact of Jesus’ sufferings and death have theological meaning only when it is interpreted from the eschatological perspective. That is, without the resurrection, his death has no theological meaning. And without the cross, there is no resurrection of Christ. Likewise, the suffering and death of Christ is intimately related to the eschatological event of his resurrection. When we view the crucifixion from the perspective of the resurrection of Christ, the death of Christ is not the end. Rather, “Golgotha is the anticipation of the end of this world and the beginning of a world that is new (155).” In this eschatological view, Jesus’ suffering has an apocalyptic sense. That is, Jesus’ death is depicted not as his personal tragedy but as the end of the world: “. . . darkness descends on the earth, the veil in the temple is torn in two . . . (Mk 15:45-56).” The death of Jesus Christ described through this apocalyptic phenomena declares the end of this world and the beginning of the new world. Through his death, the community of Christ is born, the true “beginning” of the new creation in the midst of this transitory world (II Cor. 5:17).

Therefore, when Paul says that “we have been justified by his blood,” it means that those who have faith in Christ no longer remain in the old order of this world but are now called to become the members of the new community that works for the consummation of the new world. The new creation is “already” begun with the death and resurrection of Christ, but “not yet” accomplished in this world until God restores the sovereign power through the Second Coming of Christ. In this “proleptic” eschatological perspective, justification in the blood of Jesus Christ has a theological meaning as the initial stage in the Christian faith. That is, Christian salvation is under “a process which begins in the individual heart through and leads to the just new world. It begins with the forgiveness of sins through the vicarious death of Christ and ends with “wiping away of all tears” in the last day. This ultimate goal is “already anticipated here and now in faith and in fellowship, in consolation, and in hope (183).”

Moltmann explains the process of Christian salvation through three stages: Justification, sanctification, and glorification. Justification through the blood of Christ (or the forgiveness of sins) is not yet the goal and end of Christian history. It is the initial stage that leads to the new creation of the world. Anyone who experiences God’s forgiving love in the suffering and death of Christ begins to “weep over the injustice of this world and waits for the wiping away of the tears which only this forgiveness of sins can and must complete (193).” Justifying faith leads the believers to the next stage of sanctification. The life of sanctification is to live as “a stranger in the world of Pontius Pilate (210).” It is, in other words, to participate in the suffering and death of Christ by fighting injustice and sufferings of this world in faith and hope (211). The ultimate stage of salvation is glorification, the holistic and cosmic restoration of “grace and beauty” of God’s creation.

Moltmann introduces the lives of three contemporary martyrs as examples of the life of sanctification: 1) Paul Schneider, a Reformed pastor in the Protestant church of the Rhineland during Hitler’s reign, 2) Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian and pastor of the Confessing Church under Nazi Germany, and 3) Oscar Romero, a Bishop in El Salvador under the militarism. Moltmann interprets Schneider’s martyrdom as “the suffering for faith’s sake.” His death for Christ’s sake is correspondent to that of traditional images of religious martyrs in Church history. Bonhoeffer’s sufferings and death were due to his resistance against unjust and lawless power of the state. In this sense, his martyrdom was political. He fought for the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God and of God’s politics in human history against the evil power of human politics. Romero’s martyrdom was caused by his participation in the sufferings of the oppressed people. He was an advocate of the poor, the sick, and the weak of society and struggled for their rights and benefits. His church was the place for the oppressed. Finally, his ministry was a threat to the oppressors, and they assassinated him. These three martyrs were the incarnation of God in our contemporary world. For Moltmann, they were christs for those who were oppressed under “Godlessness and violence.” Moltmann concludes that “Anyone participates in ‘Christ’s sufferings’ participates in the end-time sufferings of the world. The martyrs anticipate this end for their own time, and in so doing they become apocalyptic witnesses to the coming truth against the ruling lie, to coming justice and righteousness against the prevailing injustice, and to coming life against the tyranny of death (204).”

Preaching the Suffering and Death of Christ

What kind of sermons have you heard at church during the season of Lent and Holy Week? Do you have any sermons you still remember? How was the suffering and death of Jesus interpreted in those sermons? What is your own understanding of the suffering and death of Christ?

Most preachers emphasize the vicarious death of Christ for our sin. The focus of their sermons is that when we believe in Christ, we will be saved. However, our contemporary listeners want to hear more in relation to such questions as What does faith in Christ mean? What salvation in Christ mean? If Jesus Christ had died for our sins, why do we still live in the sinful world? Why do innocent people still suffer?

Sermons during Lent may be diverse depending on different situations of the listeners. For those who belong to the ruling, oppressing class, the Christ’s death has meaning as God’s intrusion of human history and as a warning that “the Kingdom of God is near.” To the ordinary Christians, the remembrance of the suffering and death of Christ is a renewal of their baptismal covenants. It reminds them that the Christian life is to live following the footsteps of Jesus of Nazareth, the life of martyrs. For those who are suffering innocently from terminal diseases, unexpected misfortunes, or injustice of the social structure and political power, the message of Lent will console them with hope. There is a tendency that Jesus’ death is often understood as “the God-forsakenness of the Son of God (166). However, when we remember mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son (“I am in the Father and Father is in me.”), Jesus’ suffering is understood as the divine suffering, the pain of God. That is, when Jesus suffered on the cross, God did not forsake him but was beside him and suffered with him. Even when we suffer innocently from unjust acts of violence, God is with us and suffers with us.

Therefore, Moltmann’s eschatological understanding of the Christian salvation guides us to deepen our understanding of the suffering and death of Christ as the source of faith and hope: “If God is for us, who can be against us? (Rom. 8:31).” For the believers, death is not the end. God raised the crucified Christ from the dead. Likewise, our innocent sufferings and hardships are not in vain because the resurrection of Christ guarantees the fulfillment of the sovereignty of God over the world.

If you want to learn about classical theories of atonement (the forgiveness of sins through the death of Jesus Christ) and other contemporary understandings of atonement, in addition to Moltmann’s eschatological view, Andrew Sung Park’s *Triune Atonement* and Pamela McCarroll’s *Waiting at the Foot of the Cross* are good resources. Moreover, Reginald Brantley’s essay, “Suffering and endurance” published in *Living Pulpit*, gives an insight into how we can cope with our sufferings as follows:

If we are created in the image of God, then our capacity for suffering and our capacity to learn through suffering must be characteristics we inherited from God. God put that capacity in *us*. Doesn’t that mean that God had that same capacity within God’s self? Did God learn suffering through Jesus at Calvary? Maybe that’s part of Barth’s understanding of the *humanity* of God. Barth asserts that God through Jesus of Nazareth expresses God’s freedom to love through God’s capacity to bend downward to us.[[4]](#endnote-1) God is together with us (God is our partner), Barth says,[[5]](#endnote-2) and that must mean, in part, that God intends to see us through to spiritual, and indeed, human maturity. We learn and grow and are molded through suffering that produces endurance which produces character which produces a hope that never dies and which connects us to God’s love. If we recognize the humanity of God through the Holy Spirit breathing and expressing God’s self through the universal church, the Body of Christ, *i.e*., through *us*, then part of what we recognize must be God’s capacity, not to mete out arbitrary sufferings (which equals arbitrary justice, which is injustice), but God’s capacity to suffer. As James Cone states so eloquently, God is struggling with us![[6]](#endnote-3) Then God’s capacity and ability *to endure*, is in turn poured into our lives by the Holy Spirit. This all happens because God loves us (!) and wants us to reflect God back to God through the actualization of our capacity to grow. Endurance is growth. . . . humans were created in the image of God. We have the capacity to suffer and to endure, we have the capacity for action over passivity, we have the capacity to choose love over hate and we have the capacity to choose justice over injustice.

E. Gaines’ novel, *A Lesson Before Dying*, and the movies, “Silence” and “Dead Man Walking” are helpful resources for us to think imaginatively about the meaning of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ in relation to our contemporary lives.

1. Eastern Orthodox churches observe 40 day-Lent from Monday to Saturday before Holy Week (Sundays are counted in 40 days). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Marion Soards, et al, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year B., Vol. I, pp. 14-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cf., Rom. 4:25 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Zurich: John Knox Press, English translation

1960), 48-49. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
5. Ibid., 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
6. James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books,

revised edition, 1997), 169. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)