

Sojourner Truth was a slave who longed all her life to be free. Yet when she finally gained her freedom she wasn't ready for it. She found the burdens and sufferings that came with it so frightening that she was tempted to return to her former owner. She "looked back to Egypt" as she put it. But just as she was about to give up and go back, she had a vision from God. She saw that God "was all over and that" as she said, "there was no place that God was not."

"O God," she cried, "I didn't know you were so big!" She was terrified. But just as quickly as she felt overwhelmed by God's bigness, she felt a mysterious presence between herself and the Almighty. In time, she came to know that presence as Jesus, the One there for her to help her bear God's "bigness," showing her that the awesome creator God cared enough to stand beside her every moment. The One she came to know as Jesus gave her strength to stand her ground, to not go back, but to go on.

She experienced God with awe. But alongside God's awesomeness she felt God's tender presence. Along with an awareness of a God so huge, was a presence that assured her of God's loving kindness.

Sojourner Truth's experience of the bigness and the caring presence of God, are in tune with the psalmist who asks "What are human beings, that You are mindful of them?"

God is big! The whole creation declares that truth. Yet our faith declares that God also cares for us, for we puny little, seemingly insignificant, creatures.

That loving, caring, "mindfulness" is most tested, and scripture says, most expressed, when we suffer.

Paul affirms what that loving, caring presence can mean in those difficult times: *Suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope.*

I remember what a challenge it was to trust and believe that promise early in my ministry when I got home from a funeral and received a call from a sobbing woman, whose husband I'd just buried, saying that her son had just been killed in an auto accident on the way home from the cemetery. It still is!

Paul's words challenge me. Will suffering produce "endurance, character, and hope?" You watch life pile adversity and suffering upon your child - broken relationships, illness, death - and you wonder, "will suffering produce character? It's not a sure thing. Hemingway said that *the world breaks everyone, but some grow strong in the broken places.* Some do; some don't. How can suffering produce character, endurance, and hope? How can it produce strength and not bitterness and despair?

I wonder if that difficult question, that mystery, really, is the reason for Jesus' words of farewell to his disciples. He knows they're going to suffer and have to deal with fear, anger, and grief. But that's not upon them yet. So he says that he has lots he could tell them, but that they can't yet bear to hear it; so they'll have to wait. Later, the Holy Spirit will share these things with them.

What are these things that the disciples "can't bear" just yet?

Some say what he meant was that they couldn't bear to know what he must endure with his death. Later, when all that's been accomplished, they'll know the depth of his love. And that makes sense!

He could also mean that revelation is a continuing process. The *Spirit of truth*, he promises, will continue to guide them into all truth, to help them understand Jesus, as *The Truth*, revealing ever more of all he is as God's Son.

Part of that revealing has to do with our suffering. We're not ready for all that Jesus can mean in the face of injustice and suffering till we have to deal with such trials ourselves. Only when we must struggle with things that knot our guts and keep us awake at night, do we have a chance to understand his loving presence and care. That's when the Spirit will be with us! Just when we need it most!

How?

By opening our hearts and minds and helping us to see the love God pours on us in Jesus.

But how? How does God pour love on us in Jesus?

Through his body, the church! The Holy Spirit helps us see how Jesus is present with us in love and care, through his body, the church. And, we, the church, are called to help those who suffer, see that the Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, his loving presence and care, is with them, in their pain.

I'd just gotten back from trying to help someone deal with a very difficult situation; I was feeling very burdened by their pain, and what it might mean for them, and for their church. As I walked toward my office, two of you saw me, and said, "You look like you could use a hug." And you gave one.

The Spirit shows us that we don't suffer in isolation. We're meant for life together. Pain that's shared is more likely to make our broken places strong. That's why we need each other when we suffer.

A pastor called on a grieving family. An old woman was sitting in a chair, her hand on the shoulder of a young woman, seated at her feet, who had only been married three months before her husband died. It was the day after the funeral. Suddenly the young woman turned on him. "Where is God?" I've prayed to Him! Where is He?" You preach about the 'Everlasting Arms.' Where are they?" He touched the old woman's arm. "They're here," he said. "They're around you even now. These are the arms of God."

When we suffer God is with us in the one whose hand rests upon our shoulders. *Endurance, character, and hope* are more likely to grow in those who have others of faith with whom to share their suffering.

And the Spirit teaches us something else, something we can only fully appreciate when we, ourselves, are suffering - something amazing - **God suffers with us!** In the midst of suffering, the Spirit helps us to experience Jesus' presence with us sharing our pain, helping us know that God truly shares our suffering.

The Spirit helps us understand things about Jesus' cross that we can't grasp till we face trials ourselves. The Spirit helps us see that the cross means that, in love for us, God descends to the depths of life. God says, "There's no pain you can bear that I've not embraced, no darkness overtake you that I've not seen, no fear grip you that I've not known. I've passed through it, so when you pass through it, I'm with you."

Michael Lindvall was moving furniture with his friend, John. The furniture was coming out of the home of a widow friend, who'd just made the hard choice to move into a nursing home. The rest was going to the Salvation Army. It was an unhappy day, emptying rooms full of memories into a truck. Each trip out prompted new memories. As they were carrying out an old bed, John suddenly stopped, and, with a few careful words, spoke of his son's death years before. Then he was silent for a moment, looked at Lindvall, nodded upward and said, *He's been there, that's all there is to say, God's been there.*

The Spirit helps us know the presence of a vulnerable, suffering God, a Savior who's with us when we suffer and who grows "endurance, character, and hope" in us. So when we suffer we can see it as only the beginning of a chain that will end up in hope. Suffering leads to endurance, gives us strength we never had before. Endurance produces character, helps us use whatever we go through to become better people. And character gives us hope, hope that healing is happening even as we struggle. All this may take years but, we can trust, by God's grace, we'll get there.

The Spirit leads us back to the truth: that Jesus is truly God and truly human, or to use the words of Michael Lindvale's friend, John, that Jesus shows us a God, "who has been there," and, therefore, will be there, "when we need it most." The Spirit leads us back to the truth that the same God who created the wondrous universe, is mindful, always, of us! Amen.

O God,

We acknowledge the grace and blessing of your ever-present Spirit. How loving you are!

How compassionate and sensitive you are to our every need.

You provide us with life itself and bless us with gifts we cannot begin to measure:

...gifts of amazement, awe, and wonder,

...gifts for listening and sharing, gifts of excitement and imagination.

Keep us childlike in our love of learning, open to your leading, and help us to rest in your wisdom.

We are blessed and grateful.

May our lives reflect your glory, our words & ways reflect your will.

Keep us ever learning.

Keep us ever watching for your lessons.

And keep us ever close to you.

We thank you, that in your wisdom you reveal to us through the Spirit what we can bear to know.

...that we have received and know your Holy Spirit who abides with us and guides us.

...for Jesus who is one with you and the Holy Spirit,

...and for the continuing education Jesus gives through the Spirit.

We pray for ourselves,

...that by the ongoing inspiration and revelation of the Spirit,

.....we continue to learn, develop, and mature as faithful disciples.

...for grace to be humble and teachable, and receptive to the Spirit

.....who confronts, corrects and challenges, enlivens, leads, and loves us.

We pray for others,

...for those who doubt you have any further truth to reveal to humanity and expect no revelation.

...for openness for those whose faith has been closed to the Spirit's surprising intrusions.

...for self-awareness in those who do not desire ongoing spiritual education,

....who believe they know all they need to know about the Christ.

We pray for our church, for those who minister to our children,

...and for the movement of your Spirit in the hearts of those you desire to call to work with them,

...so that our faith family might grow and be strengthened.

On this Memorial Day weekend, we remember those who suffered and died for our freedom,

...those who sacrificed to protect it against threats by foreign tyrants,

...and those who sacrificed so that freedom might be secured for those to whom it was being denied.

We pray for those who are sacrificing now in Iraq and Afghanistan,

..hoping that freedom and peace might come soon, and they might be able to return home.

We pray also, for every creature that lives along the Gulf Coast,

...that they might be spared the worst effects of the terrible oil spill,

...and we pray that it will be cleaned up, and the area restored, soon.

Help us learn from this tragedy to be better stewards of the creation you have placed in our care.

As people who trust that you are with us, "when we need it most,"

...we pray for those known to us with special needs: