

Suffering through Lent: Illness and God's promises

by [Deanna A. Thompson](#) in the [March 22, 2011](#) issue



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When Ash Wednesday arrived in 2009, I couldn't muster the courage to go to church. The thought of having one of our pastors make the sign of the cross on my forehead and say, "You are dust and to dust you shall return" was more than I could handle. The reminder of our mortality certainly has its place; it wakes us up and calls us to attend to the preciousness and fleetingness of life on earth. But in 2009, my recently diagnosed stage IV cancer had already reduced two of my vertebrae to dust, and I feared that the rest of me wasn't far behind.

What was on my immediate "to do" list was to learn how to live with stage IV cancer. I spent the month after my diagnosis resigning from virtually every aspect of my life: chairing my department, speaking at various places, leading different events at our church and volunteering at my daughters' schools. The only assignment from which I didn't resign was my spring theology course.

Holding on to this one aspect of life became integral to my slow steps toward healing. During the first month of class, teaching was the only activity that got me out of bed and dressed for the day. Outside the classroom, my colleagues lovingly and graciously encouraged me. Inside the classroom I was blessed with one of the

most mature, inquisitive and good-natured groups of students I'd had in a long time. The students' enthusiastic engagement with me and with the theology we studied reassured me that cancer had not invaded every part of my life.

In a typical semester, my personal life makes regular appearances in the classroom—not just because I like to talk about myself, but because getting personal is part of our religion department's pedagogical approach. We don't just teach religion; we also practice it. In the dual role of scholar and practitioner we seek to model for our students how the study of religion can positively shape a life of faith and vice versa.

But in a department where faculty represent multiple faith traditions (Jewish, Buddhist and Christian) we also stress that we are not acknowledging our experiences as practitioners of faith for purposes of proselytizing or to coerce our students into thinking or practicing as we do. Instead, illustrations from our lives serve the larger goal of understanding religious traditions from the inside out, through the lens of persons committed to its practice.

This semester I was reluctant to get personal. My life was overrun by cancer—except in the classroom. Theology class had become the only place where cancer seemingly didn't reach, and I wasn't eager to disturb the "cancer-free" environment.

As we approached the topic of theodicy, however, I sensed that my cancer would soon make an appearance. We began with a review of the most common explanations of God's relationship to suffering. We looked first at the "hard times make you strong" line of thinking. In this view, God sends trials and suffering our way to build character and make us stronger.

The class discussed why some people embrace this response. Several students pointed to the need to know there's a reason for the suffering; others suggested that if God is all-powerful and involved in our lives, then suffering and God have to be linked.

After affirming these views as representative of many people's faith, I paused. "But do you buy this view?" I asked. Some nodded, familiar with this view of God and the worldview that supports it. Others looked skeptical.

"Certainly most of us can look back on difficult times in our lives and see that we have become stronger because of them. Sometimes challenges are good and help

us grow," I encouraged them.

"But do the hard times always lead to growth?"

The room fell silent.

"Is God responsible for sending people suffering that robs them of their dignity? For the pain that strips them clean?"

It was time.

"As some of you know," I continued hesitantly, "I've been dealing with cancer over the past few months"—I had opened the door. Now I needed to walk through it—"and some people have taken this approach with me, suggesting God has given me cancer to make me a stronger person.

"Personally, I don't buy it. Living with cancer sucks, frankly, and I have a hard time believing in a God who sends people cancer or other terminal illness in order to teach them a lesson. This view simply does not acknowledge the full scope of suffering that pervades many of our lives."

In speaking this final sentence, my voice began to shake, and I knew I was fast approaching my limit of personal disclosure for the day. So I did what teachers do when they reach an impasse: I asked another question.

"Why might those who suffer find this view of God and suffering inadequate?"

The students knew we were getting somewhere. They jumped in, suggesting that while God might be all powerful, scripture also emphasizes God's love, and a God whose love knows no bounds seems at serious odds with a God who wills cancer, AIDS, earthquakes and other sources of death and destruction on us.

Toward the end of class, we considered the theological response to suffering proposed by Daniel Migliore's book *Faith Seeking Understanding*. Migliore calls for a biblical response to God and suffering that was more thorough than the other theories we'd reviewed. He proposes a portrait of God that focuses on God's journey to the depths of human suffering, pain and alienation in the death of Jesus.

Migliore argues that Christians stand in the biblical story and are called to look at God's relationship to suffering through the lens of Jesus' life, in which God takes

suffering into God's very being but refuses to let death have the last word. God brings new life out of the tragic death of Jesus, but not as a lesson about suffering or as some guarantee that suffering can be avoided. In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God takes on human sin and suffering, ultimately overcoming them through the gift of new life.

Migliore ends his chapter on God and suffering with the insistence that in the face of real, deep experiences of suffering, theories are simply not enough. Faith involves a relationship with a God who suffers with us and refuses to leave it—or us—unredeemed.

As class came to a close, I could tell some of my students were on board with Migliore's view. Other students didn't buy it. For them, claiming allegiance to a God who ultimately overcomes suffering and death was just not enough.

One student suggested that Christian faith is ultimately a kind of wager. In faith Christians wager that God accompanies us in our suffering and that through Christ, God promises that sin, death and destruction will not triumph in the end. For some of my students, such a wager was too big of a gamble. For others, it seemed a grandiose claim lacking in sufficient evidence.

But other students—like me—were willing to stake their lives on it. I headed back to my office, realizing that I had started to embrace the season of Lent, a season that offers not just ashes but also the hope that Easter will come soon.