

SECTION 4: WHEN EARTH GIVES WAY

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Some types of suffering are more quiet than others, less obvious and more introspective. Consider the universal human grief of recognizing that life simply isn't what we expected. Each of us has a picture of what we believe life will entail, and then...*life* actually happens. There's a low-level groaning, deep in our bones, around what we hope for and what we get instead, and this rumbling echoes throughout the years of our lives.

...I think there's strength in vulnerability and honesty. We can be strong and fulfilled and carry sadness for what didn't happen. It's about letting both truths exist at once. I know I'll be OK but I'm still grieving the life I thought I would have. If you are, too, you're not alone.

-Hospice Nurse Julie McFadden

Across the board, suffering indeed seems to make room for multiple truths to exist simultaneously....and one of those truths is that we've no shortage of character- and faith-growing opportunities here.

We suffer from choices of our own making. We suffer when sidestepping God's wisdom, when we disorder our desires. We suffer for what we always wanted and will never have. We suffer from our own and others' foolishness and arrogance. We suffer when He allows it, surprisingly and undeservedly (Job), and when we're being shaped for greater growth (Joseph).

We've failed and been failed, blamed and been blamed, betrayed and been betrayed, abandoned and been abandoned. And yet also: We've healed and been healed, chosen and been chosen, loved and been loved, forgiven and been forgiven.

Oftentimes, our suffering categories overlap, like a Venn diagram of problems and pain, but also of possibilities. Our struggles expand us to receive goodness as well. Our ability to sustain in seasons of loss and grief broadens and makes richer our capacities for empathy and hope: **The depth of our suffering sets the measure for the heights of our joy.** This is why avoiding pain and struggle can keep us in lives that are small and shallow, versus broken-open, wise, and generous.

Even though our difficult human experiences are universal, our responses to pain must differ according to needs. The question, then, is not how to avoid suffering by directing our futile efforts toward building that awesome new earth Reverend Groff references in his prayer. Rather, it's how to willingly increase our depth and ability to respond in grace, *in community*. And that's why the Church is called to walk alongside, bear witness, share the load, have compassion, and offer hope.