

In 1781, deep in the interior of West Africa, in the town of Timbo, lived a 19-year-old prince, Abdul Rahman Ibrahima. He was a scholar and a warrior, the favored son of King Sori. He'd studied math, geography and Arabic in Timbuktu so he could read the Koran, committing long passages to memory. As a soldier he had recently won an important battle for his father, bringing peace to the realm.

Meanwhile on the coast an Irish doctor, John Cox, left his ship to go hunting. He got separated from his party and wandered further and further inland. By the time Abdul's people found him, he had collapsed, sick from the bite of a poisonous worm. He was brought to King Sori who investigated the wound and urged him to stay until he recovered, offering him a house and a nurse.

Dr. Cox stayed for six months in Timbo, befriending Abdul. He even taught him a little English. Finally well enough to travel, Dr. Cox bid the young prince good-bye, the two assuming they'd never see each other again. King Sori gave Cox a new set of clothes, some gold for expenses and 15 warriors to protect him as he made his way back to the coast.

In Timbo, Abdul continued to thrive under his father's favor and was given greater command in his father's army. In 1788, at age 26, he led his troops into battle and was captured. He pleaded with his captors to ransom him, claiming he would be worth more than 100 head of cattle and a man's weight in gold, but they opted to sell him to slave traders for a mere pittance—gunpowder, muskets, tobacco and rum.

The prince was clapped in chains and shipped to America. There he was taken up the Mississippi River to Natchez, Mississippi and sold to Thomas Foster, a tobacco farmer his own age.

Even after months of humiliation and a hellish journey crammed in a slave ship where he couldn't stand upright, Abdul remembered who he was and who his father was. He explained to his master that he was a prince and that his father would pay untold amounts for his freedom. Whether Foster believed him or not, he needed a slave for his farm. His only concession was to give Abdul the name Prince. But Abdul hated the name. It was a mockery.

While enslaved, Abdul married an enslaved woman named Isabella and they had children. The couple marketed their own produce in town and even kept profits for themselves. But Abdul was not free. He was certain he would never see his homeland again.

Abdul yearned for home and liberty and attempted to run away. He came back and worked as Foster's slave for decades, but he was never seen smiling.

Abdul had no time to read or study and he wasn't allowed books anyway. And yet he never forgot who he was in Timbo, and was seen tracing Arabic characters in the sand when there was a break in the work—a word or two of sacred verses, recalling his study of the Koran.

Then one day in 1807, Abdul was sent to town to sell some produce. A white man on horseback approached him. Abdul offered him sweet potatoes. The man on horseback studied Abdul's face with his one good eye. "Where are you from?" he asked.

"From Africa," Abdul answered.

“You came from Timbo?” the white man asked. Yes, he came from Timbo. Yes, his name was Abdul. And did he know whom he was speaking to? Yes, he knew very well; it was Dr. Cox, the Irishman who had stayed with his family, recovering from his illness, who had even taught him some English.

Twenty-six years after they first encountered each other, 5,500 miles away, the two happened to meet in a dusty Mississippi town—the prince and the man who owed his very survival to the prince’s father.

Dr. Cox hastened to meet Thomas Foster and did all he could to buy Abdul’s freedom, offering huge sums, money he could ill afford to part with. He’d been in a couple of shipwrecks, emigrated to the United States, practiced medicine on the frontier, lost money in bad investments and come to Mississippi to start over.

No matter what he offered, Foster would not accept it. He needed Abdul—now his overseer—too much. Foster said he couldn’t do without him. Dr. Cox died before he could buy Abdul’s freedom.

So how did his story come to light? Why is his name not lost to memory, just another of the millions of enslaved people brought to America? Others claimed to have noble backgrounds and their stories died with them. Such is the horrific nature of slavery—it robs people of their identity.

Fortunately, Dr. Cox's efforts brought Abdul's plight to the attention of abolitionists and the United States government. Secretary of State Henry Clay, an enslaver himself, was moved by the story of Dr. Cox and Abdul, and finally bought Abdul's freedom.

By then Abdul was an old man, although hardly broken in spirit. In 1828 he launched a lecture tour across the country, trying to raise money for his children's freedom, and the following year, he returned to Africa, to the new country of Liberia, founded as a home for once-enslaved Americans who had become free.

Tragically, Abdul never made it back to his home in Timbo. He passed away only months after his return to the continent. However, more than a

century later, his legacy and his unlikely encounters with Dr. Cox live on in his descendants.

Dr. Artemus Gaye, Abdul's seventh-great grandson, left Liberia after that country's civil war and is now a professor of ethics at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Illinois. He only recently learned of his princely ancestor, when he began digging into his genealogy.

"The story sounded impossible," Dr. Gaye said. "For anyone to escape the evil of slavery was a tremendous struggle. Abdul could have been another one of the forgotten, erased from history. Instead, here I am, to tell his story and carry on his name."

As most of us hopefully understand by now, slavery is evil. But we are also very much aware of evil in the world. There is the evil that impacts us such as the decisions we or others make; there's the evil we can't control such as what Abdul endured, being captured and sold and unable to get back to freedom, or the suffering that has come on us all in one form or another through the Corona virus. At the time we are enduring it, much like Abdul for so many years, sometimes it can be hard to smile at all or to have hope.

In our first reading, it picks up after Job has endured much pain, and naturally he is wondering “why, God” as the days drag on and on. He knows he is innocent, and he also has a hard time seeing the purpose of what is happening to him. He complains, describing life as heavy and an unbearable burden. He feels like a slave, burdened with oppressive tasks. He has sleepless nights. There is no joy; he has a hard time seeing hope.

Much like Abdul, he has a hard time smiling at all.

We have days like that too; perhaps many of us have had days like that since Covid began. But a question for us is how do we deal with the suffering we endure and try to make sense of it, and also how do we try to bring hope into the world and inspire people not to give up, but to move forward confident that God is with them? How do we not just be naive optimists but rather people of hope who evangelize?

With respect to suffering, it's important to remember that God does not will it, and say “I want this person to get Covid, or die of cancer.” Job's friends make that mistake; they assume he must have done something. Pope John

Paul II, in his encyclical “*On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*,” speaks of the suffering of Job to have the nature of a test.

Now does that mean that all suffering is a test? Well, no. Again, why a particular individual is suffering is mysterious. What Job shows is that God does not go around punishing people to get back at them or their family. But Job’s suffering was also not without meaning; something good came of it – Job was justified, and his faithfulness was a sign to others. Abdul’s suffering was as well once people learned of his story and he shared it through lectures.

So for one, when we look at Job, we see how God used the suffering of Job for a greater purpose. That’s tough for us to handle, because it seems to be very contradictory to a God who is loving. But it does make sense. C.S. Lewis, in his book *The Problem of Pain*,” points out how while we call God “Father,” we might prefer to call Him a grandfather, a “senile benevolence who, as they say, ‘liked to see young people enjoying themselves, ’and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, ‘a good time was had by all. ’God is kind, but beyond that, God is loving and wants us to reach our potential, which is

learning how to love Him and one another with our whole being, which pain can at times do. Lewis also points out how “everyone has noticed how hard it is to turn our thought to God when everything is going well with us,” and states how a friend of his summed up what I think is in many ideas our modern conception of God: as an airman regards his parachute; there for emergencies, but hopefully never to be used. Pain reminds us of our need for God, but also one another, for when things are going great, we can easily think we have no need of God and can do it all on our own. Pain comes along and can shatter our world; but what is so important to remember too is that all happiness in this world is fleeting, and inevitably if we put our trust into the things of this world it will end up like a house of cards. Does this mean that we should be happy about suffering, or even seek it out? Of course not. We can even be angry and frustrated about it; Job certainly is, and if you read through that book, you find many expressions of frustration and anger – but through it all he remains faithful. It is OK to cry out “why is this happening to me God?” and go through moments of frustration. Lewis rightly points out that “suffering is not good in itself” but what is good in any painful experience is learning to submit to the will of God. The challenge though is when we suffer, that is hard to do. Instead, we might get philosophical and think “why is God doing this to

me?” and indeed, in suffering, some lose their faith. For others it is deepened, because they know they do not suffer alone. As such, when we look back on suffering, we can sometimes see how we grow through it. Sometimes we learn something and grow stronger in faith; The Cross is the ultimate sign of that.

That part of the Cross is so important to remember; Saint John Paul pointed out in his encyclical that the Cross changes the meaning of suffering. It shows us how God is truly with us. We see as much in the Gospel today. Time and time in the Gospels, we see how Christ comes to the sick and heals, like He does with the mother-in-law of Peter in our Gospel today. Even before the crucifixion, where do we find Jesus? Feeding the hungry; freeing people from deafness and blindness and leprosy, and restoring the dead to life on three different occasions. And He also takes upon suffering Himself long before the Passion, suffering fatigue, homelessness and misunderstanding from those closest to Him. Christ goes forward in His mission, knowing how it will end but also knowing that suffering will save, fulfilling the words of Isaiah: “He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities.” Jesus will go forward to Calvary and suffer as a human being, suffering innocently

on our behalf. But this is not just some event set in history; the Cross reminds us constantly that our Lord loves us and is right there next to us in the trenches. We re-present that every time we come to celebrate Mass, which we call a sacrifice. And so, too, does the Cross remind us that not only does our Lord's love for us know no bounds, but that out of the most horrific of situations, good can result. On Good Friday, the worst possible thing happened – Jesus died; His mission seemingly ending in failure. But out of that, the world is redeemed.

Also, while we might not think of suffering as evangelization, I think it is one of the strongest loudspeakers for the faith there is. John Paul tells us that “When this body is gravely ill, totally incapacitated, and the person is almost incapable of living and acting, all the more do interior maturity and spiritual greatness become evident, constituting a touching lesson to those who are healthy and normal.” When a person has a deep faith, they can use their suffering to make God be known to the world. The person who suffers can think it is proof God hates them, or they can think of it as an invitation to share in the Passion of Christ, and say “Yes, I may not live forever in this world, but my suffering will not be the end of me. It may take my breath, but not my life, for Jesus Christ has given me eternal life.” Dr.

Cox was willing to suffer to gain the freedom of a man who helped save his life. And I can think of so many people I've known whose suffering has been an inspiration to me of spiritual greatness, both the suffering they had no choice in and the suffering people have taken on to help others; my grandmother Pat, who dealing with terminal pancreatic cancer was just happy to see her loved ones visit her at the hospital; my parents, who sacrificed much to provide for our family and to help my grandparents giving up things maybe they wanted for themselves to think of others; to people at the parish who've sacrificed to go on mission trips, help in the school, and do so many other things to help our parish move forward. Indeed, suffering and how we deal with it can be a form of evangelization as John Paul said.

Lastly, a word on that: evangelization. One of the things that struck me with the story of Prince Abdul is how the power of good can be such an evangelization tool in the face of evil and suffering. Because Abdul's father showed a stranger kindness, that impacted Dr. Cox who went on to help Abdul later in life. Maybe his actions also evangelized the slave owner, even if he didn't realize the immorality of what he was doing. Abdul then went on to speak to evangelize others, and it helped fuel the abolition

movement which would eventually triumph. One thing we should ask ourselves too is are we willing to evangelize, which is more important than ever today in a world that can be hostile to so much of what we believe. Saint Paul in the second reading says he has made himself a slave to all to win over as many as possible. What that looks like in action takes many forms.

For one, like Dr. Cox and Abdul's father, we stress the dignity of the human person. How do we look at others? Do we objectify the body, or look down based on politics or religion, or like them, see a human being in need? Do we take advantage of others and use them?

Second, are we willing to suffer for what is right? Dr. Cox was by spending what little he had left. Are we willing to challenge others who may be gossiping, bullying, or who believe things that are contrary to what our faith teaches? Are we willing to face "cancel culture" as it's come to be called head on?

Third, are we willing to suffer by being with others and helping them? Think of the parent who gets up to tend to an infant, or who works for several

hours helping a child with a school project. When we do this, much like with Abdul's father and Dr. Cox, what they did was to evangelize in a sense the message of love one another as I have loved you; and that made a big difference in the lives of others. Our kindness, our compassion, our decency - these make a huge difference.

And fourth with respect to evangelization, as Abdul and Dr. Cox's story illustrates, God puts people in our lives every day. Some are easy to like. Some though we can be quick to judge. And with some there is suffering in a sense to be with them, because they get under our skin or rub us the wrong way. But when we, like Dr. Cox and like Abdul's father see the human being first, we can say to ourselves how can I evangelize this person and help them. It may entail a bit of suffering to be patient, but it just might bring that person closer to God.

Life can be very hard, and sometimes hope can be hard to come by. Be it Covid, other people who wrong us or break our hearts, bad decisions we make, or looking at the state of affairs in the world, or facing tough circumstances with health or finances or work, the temptation can be to sometimes give up. But God never does; it's why He is with us always. It's

why He died for us. It's why He suffers with us. Yes, suffering is allowed and yes so much of it is a mystery. But the Cross reminds us we are not alone; and reminds us to look at the world with hope. As we receive our Lord in the Eucharist, let us receive that love. Let us be reminded we are forgiven when we are down on ourselves. Let us be reminded we are not alone. Let us be reminded that God is leading us through this life. And let us be reminded that like Jesus, and Saint Paul, and like Dr. Cox and Abdul's, we share a job in evangelization by testifying to the world what is true. That can only happen when God shines through us. We take up our crosses and follow Him, but we do not bear them alone - so let us help one another bear our crosses too as we testify to who God is knowing that He is with us and, through our evangelization, help one another come to know the God who is love.