

**Sermon Notes of
Guest Speaker Nan Kuhlman's Sermon on February 17, 2019:**

"The God of Negative Space (John 16:33)"

[In today's sermon, guest speaker Nan Kuhlman emphasizes that we do not pass through any kind of suffering or anxiety without God's full presence with us.]

Notes

Introduction:

- She has been recently thinking about the mystery of God and how He reveals Himself to us in some unusual ways.
- Nan then showed the eight of diamonds playing card on the screen.
- Then she showed a close up of the centered part of the eight of diamonds card – the blank white space here forms the number eight.

- Now, there's a concept in art, called "negative space."
- And that's where the empty space around the main focus is actually part of the art work.
- Nan first heard about negative space on a podcast by Gretchen Rueben, an author, who wrote a book a few years ago called the "Happiness Project."

- On the podcast, Gretchen talked about when she and her daughter went to London and while there, they saw a Harry Potter exhibit.
- Everything in the building had something to do with the Harry Potter exhibit, even in the elevator.
- Gretchen then talked about "negative space" where we don't think about certain spaces as being part of the art.

Concept of negative space in art:

- Positive space in art is the main focus.
- However, without that negative space, the picture or sculpture would not be complete.
- As we've seen, without the "negative space", without the white in that playing card, the picture would not be complete.

- Nan then showed a painting of a dog's face in black lines, where the artist used a lot of white space to create the image of the painting.
- Next, Nana showed a sketch of man's face and commented that without the white space, the blank spots, the picture would not make sense.

God's lack of presence:

- So, there are a lot of situations in our lives, where we think God isn't present.
- Probably, the biggest one is suffering.
- If there was ever a place where we feel alone, where we feel God can't certainly be in this, it's more than likely in suffering.

- Our suffering can occur when we lose a spouse or lose property to a fire, which occurred in Northern California.
- Or our suffering occurs with our illnesses or losses, or disappointments in our lives.

Today's message:

- Nan's purpose today is to suggest that we have bought into a myth that says the Christian life always free of trouble, and that if we suffer, it's somehow our fault.
- Instead, she'd like to propose to us that God is found in the negative space of our suffering – where we think He isn't, He very much is.
- So, first, let's consider that we have bought into the myth that the Christian life means blessings all the time.
- We equate blessing with no hassles and with getting everything we want as if God is a big Santa Claus or a vending machine.
- We look at this life as a transaction.
- "OK, God, I'm going to church, so You need to give me what I want."
- "I'm reading the Bible, so get me that new car."
- Far too often we get into a mindset that if we are not receiving physical blessings or getting what we want, then somehow we've done something wrong or that God's displeased with us.
- And when tragedy strikes, we too often ask: "Where is God? Why didn't God prevent this?"
- The danger in all of this is that we can go down in a spiral of legalistic thinking which says, "God must not love me because I am suffering. I must have sinned, and I'm being punished. God has left me."
- Thinking like this, first of all, is incorrect and it's certainly not helpful at all.
- In John chapters 14-16, Jesus is trying to prepare His disciples before His soon coming crucifixion, because they don't know what's going to happen.

John 16:33, (NIV) "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

- So, Jesus was trying to prepare His disciples for what He was going to endure Himself.
- Jesus, Himself, was going to endure trouble also, like He had never had before in His human form.
- Now, we know that our world is inhabited by human beings who all have free moral agency to make choices, both good and bad.
- Sometimes we suffer because of our own bad choices and sometimes because of other people's bad choices.
- So, Jesus didn't say we wouldn't have trouble – but He said that He has overcome.
- And if we are gathered up in Him, in other words, we are in Christ, then that means we have overcome, too!
- So, how do we do that?

First, we change the stories we tell ourselves about suffering:

- How do we overcome suffering and make it through?
- Well, first we change the stories we tell ourselves about suffering.
- We're good at telling ourselves stories.
- For example, you're at a grocery store, and somebody, you know from work, comes down the aisle and they don't say hello to you.
- So, what do you think? She/he hates me!
- The person probably didn't see you because they were so caught up in their own thoughts.
- So, the first step to move through suffering is to change our stories about suffering.
- We stop blaming ourselves, we stop blaming others, and we stop blaming God, and then we start resting in who we know God to be.
- The Dalai Lama has an interesting quote:

If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.
- So, not only do we have to show other people compassion, we also have to show ourselves compassion.
- We are only human – we mess up a lot – we are pretty fallible.
- Now through prayer, through meditation, through contemplation, and other spiritual disciplines, we end up knowing who God is.
- And when we focus on God, who doesn't change, then our world and our bodies, which do change, might not be quite so scary.

Another way we change the story is by reframing our suffering:

- Poet and author Rainer Maria Rilke wrote a short book titled, "Letters to a Young Poet."
- Here's a quote from the book:

How could we forget those ancient myths that stand at the beginning of all races? The myths about dragons, that at the last moment, are transformed into princesses. Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses, who are only waiting to see us act just once with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love.

- So, maybe our suffering, the occurrences that happen in our lives that set us off, maybe there is a princess in there.
- In the "Beauty and the Beast" movie, the beast was very scary at first to the princess, but ultimately she found true love, which is what she needed.

- So, Nan’s challenge to us is to think about suffering, disappointment, and loss differently and reframe them by thinking that these negative experiences might have a prince or princess in them.

Changes in life:

- Now, in most places in America, there are very distinct seasons.
- This should help us realize that there are different seasons of life that we go through, as well.
- Back in Ohio, where she and Craig used to live, winter was a time when there was a lot of snow and they kept thinking, “Will this ever end?” And it does.
- We can also think that this particular suffering will never change or end, but guess what? – It does.
- Everything is changing all the time.
- When we’re in a good place, we don’t like things to change, right?
- But the flip side of that is when we’re in a bad place, things are going to change, too.
- Another author that Nan likes to read is Richard Rohr (spiritual author), and he says:

Loss precedes all renewal; emptiness makes way for every new infilling; every transformation in the universe requires the surrendering of a previous “form.”

- So we have to be ready to give up some things, even those we think are pretty good.
- But new things may be better or are able to help us grow.
- Richard Rohr also commented that the phrase “Do not be afraid” or also translated “fear not” occurs in the Bible 365 times.
- It’s the most frequent command in the Bible.
- Fear keeps us from seeing God in negative spaces.
- But, when we reframe suffering, we shift away from the myth that as a Christian our lives won’t have any trouble.

We shouldn’t ignore our anxiety and grief:

- Now the second idea is that when we are experiencing these times of suffering, difficulty or loss, we should allow ourselves to feel the fear or the anxiety or the grief fully in our bodies rather than glossing over it or trying to rush through it.
- The example of author Elizabeth Gilbert, who lost a loved one a year ago, now every morning dances to whatever song her Spotify play list pulls up.
- So, she dances to let her grief just pass through.
- We are physical beings, and we have to process suffering, loss, grief in and through our bodies.
- Jesus showed us it is good to be human. He ate and drank and even wept when his friend Lazarus died, even though He knew he was going to raise Lazarus out of the tomb.
- Jesus felt things and so we need to let ourselves feel things, as well.

- On August 8th in 2016, Rick Shallenberger, our Regional Director, came to our house, in Ohio, and said to Craig and me, “What do think about New Hope?” [That meant this church in Southern California.]
- Craig was concerned about the fact that, even though he wanted to be a pastor, why would this church want him to be their pastor, when he didn’t have any experience.
- Nan, on the other hand, was happily thinking, “I’m moving to California!”
- Then Nan remembered a pod cast by Rob Bell called “Seasons” where he talks about taking his boy to school and how that was the end of one season and the beginning of another.
- Nan’s grieving process about this monumental move and transition began on August 22nd in 2016, even though they didn’t move here until March 2017.
- It took them three and a half days to drive out here, taking their dogs with them.
- During the day, Nan was great but during those three evening dinner meals, she would cry quite hard with sobbing, etc.
- She was letting the grief of this dramatic change pass through her.
- It took her about a year, living here, for all the grief to finally pass through.
- It’s good to grieve and acknowledge your loss.

Concluding comments:

- Just as art needs “negative space” to complete the full visual image, so our lives need negative space, those times of loss or suffering, because it’s part of being fully human.
- Jesus, fully human and fully divine, experienced grief and suffering, so why should we be any different?
- And here’s the good news – by experiencing the difficulties of life, it gives us the chance to realize that we really have a God who walks with us every step of the way.
- We are never alone. That’s so important to remember, we are never alone.
- And, we have each other, because all of us have suffered loss, all of us have suffered disappointment.
- So the next time we experience disappointment or loss, reframe it.
- Allow ourselves to feel disappointed or sad, but remember that God is always with us.

Closing prayer