

Hope Does Not Disappoint

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Psalm 95, John 4:5-42, Romans 5:1-11

“Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope...”

This is the phrase that caught my attention in this week’s reading from Romans. It caught my attention because it connects the dots between suffering and hope.

I grew up in a time and a place where a lot was said about suffering and hope.

Some subscribed to the prophetic view—God’s people suffer because they sin against God and one another; the suffering ends as the sufferer repents and returns to God’s way.

Think about Job; he is prosperous and well-regarded by his friends until he is afflicted with material and personal losses. His friends come and—in the name of being helpful—try to get Job to make his confession. Because, surely he has sinned, hasn’t he?

It would be pretty to think of this an ancient formula, yet we can recall how “sin and suffering” have been touted as “cause and effect” for the deadly illness HIV/AIDS; for the devastation of Hurricane Katrina; for the destruction of the twin towers in New York City; and for the desolation wrought by the typhoon in Haiti.

Then there are those that considered suffering to be a trial: God testing our faith while we are called to stoic survival.

“God will never give you more than you can bear.” These are supposed to be words of assurance, but my heart recoils in horror. Does personal strength entice God to test our faith with a bad diagnosis, a fatal car crash, or a broken marriage? Do we need to be weak to be free of our troubles?

Some consider suffering to be redemptive—we suffer because Christ suffered and we want to be more like Christ.

Heck, in my family you can tell how meritorious we think we’ve been when we begin to talk about the “quality of the suffering.”

With all these and so many more schemas in play, what are we to make of Paul’s affirmation: “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope...”

It made me nervous, Paul's boast about suffering—it sent me skittering to my Theology Dictionary of the New Testament... where I found this:

“For sufferings do not bear their meaning within themselves. They are simply the envelope of the [power] of God which comes to fulfillment in the [sufficiency] (2 Cor 12:9) of the [life of Christ] which is manifest in them.”ⁱ

Paul, it seems, puts suffering into the context of the life in Christ, and wraps it and us in the love of God. For “in Christ” we come to be at peace with God and share in God's shalom—that wholeness and peace that pass understanding.

Paul calls us to look beyond a simple cause and effect relationship for suffering. He looks instead the realities of the life in which he and the Christians around him stand and articulates the connection between suffering and hope.

This is not suffering for sin's sake and this is not suffering for suffering's sake. It is instead a struggle against even our own ideas about suffering that would tear us away from the transformative power of the life in Christ.

Paul assures us that we do not struggle or suffer alone. The Holy Spirit—our sustainer and comforter—pours the love of God into our hearts.

And if, in the course of our suffering, we come to that place where we can only cry out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” we have company in Jesus Christ from the cross.

Suffering and hope became a litany for me this week. Pastor and homiletician Laird Stuart declares that this passage sends us out “on a pilgrimage of hope.”ⁱⁱ

A pilgrimage of hope... With his words, I began to wonder about the places we might go, the strange places where we might meet hope. Perhaps we might even meet hope at the local watering hole.

Imagine that you are a woman, making your way to get water in the heat of the midday sun. You are alone, ostracized by the other village women who know you. You might as well be wearing a scarlet letter on your dress.

You meet a stranger at the well—make that a rude stranger—a man determined to bring you more trouble because he ignores the social boundaries between men and women and Samaritans and Jews. He demands a drink and then promises this frothy thing called “living water” without any visible means to deliver it.

What do you think? after all, you've heard men make promises before, haven't you. Yet, in the deep recesses of your heart, you thirst—and have thirsted for years.

This stranger lays bare your suffering: you've had five husbands all lost to death or divorce, both of which are circumstances beyond your control. Your need for survival has driven you to live with a man who has not married you. The law calls it adultery, and that leads to the social condemnation that has you drawing water at the well at noon day.

Confronted with a personal truth, your eyes are opened to The Truth who stands before you: the Messiah, the embodiment of God's love, who is the hope of all who will believe. In your journey from suffering to hope, you are transformed into a witness who shares testimony with all who will hear. God is with us, do not be afraid.

It is not the suffering that redeems and transforms us, but the steadfast presence of God's love that moves with us through suffering and beyond. As Laird Stuart points out, "It is God's power at work in us that makes [Paul's] progression possible. The passage reminds us that the Christian life is not a do-it-yourself project but a do-it-together project."ⁱⁱⁱ

I am mindful that last Sunday, we celebrated the infant baptism of Abigail Evans Prince and on Thursday and Friday, we celebrated the lives of Tom Morse and Pat Burnett. In each of these celebrations, we testified to the hope of our faith.

We made promises that we would help Abigail "know and follow Christ." We now have a mutual obligation to share with her the stories of Jesus, and we have the privilege of sharing the stories of our own pilgrimage that leads us, again and again, to trust in God's grace and to share God's love.

For Tom and for Pat, we remembered their lives, recounted moments from their pilgrim's story. Then we bore witness to the hope into which they—like Abigail—were baptized, in which they lived, and into which they died. We recited our hope: that in life and in death we belong to God, that nothing has the power to separate us (or them) from God's love—not suffering or struggles or disasters or aging or illness or sin or heartache or doubt or even death itself.

Indeed—as Paul will say in this very letter to the church in Rome—nothing in life or in death will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

From birth to death, from baptism to the life everlasting; our pilgrimage of hope not only includes the steadfast presence and love of God, but also fellow travelers—other pilgrims of hope.

When God's love seems distant or absent; when we struggle with doubt or shame, anger or apathy; when ***we are lost***—the community of faith becomes a witness to and for us.

We bear witness to one another and to the world by speaking and showing the love of God. We bear witness to one another and to the world of the transformative power of the life in Christ. We share hope amidst the pain. God is with us still.

Five years ago, I walked onto the cardiac floor at Rochester General Hospital. The man that I'd come to visit was critically ill, and we didn't know if he would ever make it home.

I entered the room, uncertain of where the conversation would lead. He welcomed me to his bedside, and then pointed my attention to the west-facing window. The sun was setting and it was glorious in hues of orange and pink and purple and blue. He noted the beauty and said, "Isn't God good to us."

"Isn't God good..." an affirmation crafted by a lifelong pilgrim's journey.

So we hear this promise from Paul, "...suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit..." Amen.

ⁱ Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. Vol III. Gerhard Kittel, ed. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids. 1979. page 650.

ⁱⁱ Laird J. Stuart. *Pastoral Perspective on Romans 5:1-11. Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*. Vol 2. Bartlett and Taylor, eds. WJK: Louisville. 2010. page 90.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. page 90.