

A Pilgrimage of Hope  
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I think most people would agree these are interesting times in which we live. I tend to mark time by identifying themes, and a common theme I have heard emerge recently is a desire to get back to the “good old days,” whether those good old days happened three years ago or thirty years ago. I was talking with a parent last week who said referencing his adolescent child’s attitude, “Lynne, for my child yesterday is always better than today no matter how bad things really were.” Put another way, when we are in a difficult place, it’s tempting to look back and say things were better during this era or that era. Because nothing could be as bad as now. Yet every moment in human history has had its own particular struggle with darkness and suffering, even when we look back through a nostalgic lens. It is part of the human condition, to be born into a world full of light only to be overshadowed and blinded with clouds of sin throughout our lives, both our individual sins and the sins of others.

Bishop Desmond Tutu once said, “Hope is being able to see there is light even among all the darkness.” The season of Lent invites us to bring this darkness into focus, to sit with it awhile that we might take notice of the subtle sources of light in our midst. This process allows us to grasp a better understanding of our environment and the ways we have become separated from one another and from God.

When I was in college, I worked at Montreat Conference Center for a couple of summers. One of our teambuilding activities was to go caving, or spelunking, as a group. As we made our way from the mouth of the cave to an inner room, we used headlamps to guide our way. Even with our lamps burning at the highest setting, we could barely see where we were going so we were holding hands. Our guide had led this expedition so many times that she was able to guide us purely from memory.

Once we got into the inner room, we were told to sit and turn our lamps off to sit in total darkness. Our guide told us that this room had no light source and was the closest we could duplicate experiencing full blindness. After about a minute, we were told to turn our headlamps back on, and I kid you not, it was as bright as day in that room. Our pupils had dilated so much in that time in the darkness, we could see details and crevices that we had no clue existed in that room when we entered it. From that room, we went on to explore many more heights and depths of the cave, but we would have missed the details and beauty had we not taken to the time to allow our eyes to adjust to the darkness and the terrain we were inhabiting. That is something like the process of Lent, sitting in the dark to let our eyes adjust that we might have greater vision and insight.

This morning’s text comes from Paul’s letter to the Romans where he names the process and journey of suffering, of inhabiting those dark places. So, I invite you to hear God’s word to you today as I read Romans 5:1-11:

*Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup>through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. <sup>3</sup>And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup>and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup>and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*

*<sup>6</sup>For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup>Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. <sup>8</sup>But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. <sup>9</sup>Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. <sup>10</sup>For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. <sup>11</sup>But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.*  
This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Probably the most famous part of this passage begins in verse 3 where Paul says that we “boast in our sufferings.” It is a phrase that has always struck me as odd, because suffering never seemed to be something I wanted to brag about. I’m usually in too much of a vulnerable place to lay all my laundry out like that. To be sure, we have all known someone who upon hearing about some difficulty we were going through would respond, “You think that’s bad? Let me tell you what happened to me.” And they effectively tap danced all over your crisis. But I don’t think that is what Paul had in mind. More likely, Paul is encouraging the Romans to see their suffering through a different lens. He goes on to present what I would call his equation or secret to success for the process of suffering: “...suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope.”

This phrase is often quoted and offered to those people going through some sort of hardship, and I confess that it immediately gets my attention. The type-A, driven Protestant work ethic in me does not usually take suffering passively. When I’m going through a tough time, give me a plan! I don’t do helpless well. To manage my anxiety, I immediately start plotting and scheming my way through the suffering. First comes the blow of the crisis that has presented itself. Then there is shock, but never fear, because the process of endurance is not far behind. Surely, it will demonstrate to me how strong and resilient I will become. Then, I’ll radiate all this calm character and wisdom. Finally, as I’m rounding the bases, Hope will be cheering me to home plate.

I’ve got this! I’m gonna suffer like a Boss! Maybe I’ll even write a book about it! Paul has assured us that the good news in the midst of all of our suffering is that if we have some trial that we are facing, there are no worries. He has spelled out the formula for Suffering Like a Saint. We will all become bestselling spirituality writers and gurus and go on a speaking tour together— silver linings all over the place!

Except, you probably have some ideas about how this equation can break down. It turns out endurance can get pretty messy. The advice is always something like “take it one day at a time,” but when you have questions about whether you will make it through the next 5 minutes, endurance can seem like too lofty of a goal. We can feel like we are learning more about our helplessness and weakness than about our strength and resilience.

And then there is the question of character. Someone once told me that while all these challenges she was experiencing were supposed to build character, she felt that they were actually turning her into a character. Which is actually true – she is a character. Nevertheless, she is, indeed, a person of great character.

This portion of Paul's equation stumps me, because it is hard to know what he means by character. We would assume he means someone of good character, a person of integrity. We all know people, however, who have suffered a great deal, and their character was not intact on the other side of their crisis. It just seems to add to the suffering when one feels like he or she is "failing" at it.

To me, this is the part of the equation that begins to unravel which leads me to push back a little. For one, as I mentioned before, people do love to share this text when someone is going through some sort of trial. Presbyterian pastor and author Mary Ann McKibben Dana categorizes Paul's formula in her "Anthology of Unhelpfulness."<sup>1</sup> You know, like "What doesn't kill you will make you stronger" and the like. These kinds of statements might be true, and some people may even derive comfort from them. But as your Associate Pastor for Care and Mission who spends a lot of time on the frontlines of Suffering, my sense is that it's mostly not helpful. It often can do harm. The last thing most people need in times of distress is someone care-splaining to them about their endurance and character; "if you aren't feeling hopeful yet then you are probably doing it wrong. Your faith is malfunctioning." That's not very encouraging.

And I'm not saying Paul's equation is wrong or bad, but I suspect it's not a linear process in the way that it is presented. It reminds me of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. People often get into trouble with this theory, because they think it is a check list that people go through to somehow complete the grief process, like cooking with a recipe or TurboTax. Grief is a lifelong process and people usually move in and out of these stages, often in no particular order. I suspect the same might be true for Paul's equation, that while we suffer, we fluctuate in and out of hope, endurance and character building. It is a messy, flawed and difficult process, but we push through it because we still seek hope and we seek it desperately.

As I mentioned earlier, every part of human history has had its fair share of suffering. Paul was addressing the Roman church as they struggled to live a life of faith under an oppressive Roman Empire. He certainly was speaking from experience knowing firsthand what suffering looks like and feels like. Even though I like to pick on him, we can trust Paul's words. We, too, know a little something about suffering. I heard in the news over the past few weeks that our world is facing the worst humanitarian crisis since 1945. Starvation and famine have struck the countries of Yemen, South Sudan, Somalia, and northeast Nigeria, despite all the measures against poverty that have been taken. The pictures are unbearable. Our national headlines become more erratic and drive a deeper and deeper wedge in our country. People we know and love struggle with depression, addiction, domestic violence, infidelity and cancer. There is not a day that goes by where I don't encounter some deeply broken spirits. We know something of suffering, and Paul's equation, while beautifully presented, can be a shaky one. How do we remain people of the Good News in the face of so much Bad News? From where shall our hope come?

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<sup>1</sup> Dana, MaryAnn McKibben. "Suffering, Endurance, Character, Hope." *Journal for Preachers* (2005): 33-36. Print.

From my own observations, I have discovered that the first glimmers of hope come from our willingness to simply show up to the process, even if we have very low expectations. Suffering can be instructive. It has a way of stripping away the unnecessary pieces of our lives, so that we may see things more clearly, appreciate the important things. Suffering has a way of enabling us to cut through the nonsense and the distractions to get straight to the point. From my earlier analogy, it is our willingness to stumble our way into the cave toward the inner room. That takes great courage which I believe is hopeful.

Once we have been committed to the process of suffering, our eyes begin to dilate and adjust to our surroundings, and we start to see things differently. It is still too dark for most human eyes to perceive what we see, but our time in this cave is acclimating us to a deeper level of truth. Even though that truth resides in the dark places which scares most people, our time in the cave can reveal some hopeful new ideas. In a speech at Metropolitan AME Church in Washington DC, Civil Rights activist Valarie Kaur was naming some of the dark spots in our world and she offered this, "What if, what if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb?"<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein, Episcopalian priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor says, "new life starts in the dark. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark."<sup>3</sup>

Maybe the hope we've been looking for lies in the new life that is to come. Maybe the hope that Paul seeks to offer in our scripture is not grounded in his equation but flows from the verse that follows..."For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly."<sup>4</sup> What liberates us in our suffering, what enables us to boast in our suffering is that we don't have to get it right. We don't have to jump on the merry-go-round of Paul's suffering equation and nail the landing. Because Christ is there precisely when we are weak. Christ comes at just the right time. Christ comes for the ungodly and try as I might, I am ungodly more often than I would care to admit. We all are. But in all of our ungodliness, Christ is there. Christ is there on the bathroom floor, Christ is there at the chemo bed, Christ is there in the courtroom, Christ holds us tight when we shiver in our sleep. Christ is there.

This season of Lent, we are invited into the cave for a variety of reasons, but mostly it is to hang out in the dark with Jesus. Some of you are already there and have been there for some time. Some of you are afraid to go in. But perhaps if we go together, holding hands, we can learn about suffering and endurance and character together. Perhaps, as our eyes adjust to the darkness, over time we will begin to see sources of light breaking through the cracks. Perhaps, it will be revealed which path we will take to move through the darkness and towards Hope, the Hope which does not disappoint. Because new life starts in the dark, the mysterious miracle of Resurrection began in a dark sealed tomb. So come. Let us head to the darkness knowing that Jesus Christ knows this journey by heart and will deliver us to Resurrection. Thanks be to God, Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Kaur, Valarie. "New Year's Eve Watch Night Service." Valarie Kaur, 09 Jan. 2017. Web. 17 Mar. 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2014. Print.

<sup>4</sup> Romans 5:6