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Psalm 8, Romans 5:1-5

Here I Stand

This is Trinity Sunday—the one “feast day” in our church calendar that celebrates a doctrine of the church rather than a story of the faith.

The early church had eye-witness accounts of Jesus Christ, and personal experience Holy Spirit power, and they believed in the glory and majesty of Yahweh. These early believers wrestled with their understanding of God whom they experienced in different ways and the heart of monotheism which declared that God is one.

Apostles like Paul sought to translate the origin of the faith from its Aramaic language and Jewish culture so that it could be grasped by “the Gentiles,” by Roman pagans who worshipped a pantheon of gods.

Over the years the church adopted this language: a triune being—three persons of one substance—to express the mystery of God.

The study of God’s identity is not just a relic of our past—in 2006, theologians gathered in Louisville to study the Trinity. Their paper, titled *God’s Love Overflowing*, sought “to express the amazing riches that flow boundlessly from the triune God who in loving freedom seeks and saves us, reconciles and renews us, and draws us into loving relationships that reflect the eternal oneness of God.”¹

This passage from Romans chapter 5 was selected for Trinity Sunday, because in it, Paul shares his testimony to God in ways that will someday clarify the doctrine of the Trinity.

But Paul isn’t interested in doctrine for the sake of doctrine—he is interested in sharing the promises of God and exploring God’s grace in which we stand. He begins: We stand in the grace of God, through Jesus Christ, in whom we have been proclaimed righteous. He ends: the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Paul’s understanding of God book ends this tiny sermon he shares with the Christians of Rome who are facing opposition in the synagogues and in the city square.

“We boast” he says... Later, he will tell the Roman church, “you only stand through faith, so do not become proud, but stand in awe” (Rom 11:20). But at this moment, he boasts in two things: the hope of sharing God’s glory and in suffering.

Paul doesn’t use the language of a braggart, but the language of confidence. The grace of reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ gives confidence that “we” will share in “the glory of God.” For Paul, this confidence has the power to sustain people of faith even when times are rough.

He insists: “Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope...” This caught my attention because it connects the dots between suffering and hope.

We live in a nation where a lot gets said about suffering, but little of that is about hope.

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

We have heard the story of Job; he is prosperous and well-regarded by his friends until he is afflicted with material and personal losses. Then his friends come and—they try to be helpful. “We’re just sayin’ Job—confess your sins and all this will get better...” Surely the catastrophes of his life can only be explained by sinfulness—right?

It would be pretty to think that this is ONLY an ancient way of thinking; yet “sin and suffering” are touted as “cause and effect” all the time. The HIV/AIDS epidemic, Hurricane Katrina, the 9/11 attacks, school shootings, and so many other catastrophic events are routinely linked to sinfulness by fire and brim stone preachers.

Others 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 supposed words of assurance pain my heart. When I hear them, I wonder: does strength entice God to test us? If we were weaker would the medical tests have been negative, would the fatal car crash have been a fender bender, would the broken marriage have remained whole? Is weakness some sort of insurance against catastrophe?

Yet others consider suffering to be redemptive—we suffer because Christ suffered; we want to be more like Christ.

In my family you can tell how meritorious we think we’ve been whenever we begin to talk about the “quality of the suffering.”

Boasting about suffering puts Paul at odds with our culture that abhors even simple discomfort. Just look at our television programming, stuffed full of pharmaceutical ads that promise instant relief from all manner of ills.

You might be able join me in remembering a time when houses and cars in Texas didn’t come with air-conditioning. I’ll confess that in my last summer of seminary, as my car a/c went on the fritz, I didn’t think “it must need freon,” I thought, “I’ve gotta get a new car!”

Suffering is something we avoid—and when we see it, we sometimes respond with phrases like, “there but for the grace of God, go I” as if God’s grace were a universal panacea against struggle. Perhaps that is why this passage sounds so strange; because, Paul specifically talks about the “grace in which we stand” before he boasts about “our sufferings.”

Grace and suffering coexist for Paul. He knows that suffering has the power to expose when our trust is well placed and where it is misplaced. Illness can reveal “health” to be an idol; but the healing wholeness of Jesus Christ remains throughout. Injury can reveal “productivity” to be an idol; but God’s

purpose for us remains steadfast. Aging can reveal “self-reliance” to be an idol; but we can rest in the promise that “God our help in ages past” remains “our hope in years to come.”

Paul tells us that the trials of life produce endurance—in other places in the New Testament translators use the words: perseverance or patience or even steadfastness. As we persevere, we grow in character and become confident in God’s providential care. Suffering and affliction become a place to encounter God as we are held in God’s steadfast love. This is the source of our hope.

Paul tells us that this “hope does not disappoint us.”

Unlike the fleeting promises of this world our hope is fixed in the love of God in Jesus Christ. When Paul tells the Romans about this love, he says that “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38-39).

God’s love overflows—because that is who God is. God’s love is steadfast—because that is who God is. God’s love does not depend on us, but come to us freely in Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit—because that is who God is.

We hold onto hope because God is the one who loves in freedom, the one who seeks and saves, the one who reconciles and renews—the three in one who holds us in the fierce grip of grace in every circumstance of our lives.

Paul writes that our enduring hope is in sharing the glory of God.

This means that we will share in the nature of God, share in the communal heart of God, share in the love of God. Not that we will become God, but that we will become like God overflowing with love that that makes us one with God AND with each other.

Friends, Paul issues our invitation—“Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us...”

This day, may we stand in the grace of God, relying on the promises of God, growing in the love of God, living in the unity of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Trinity Working Group of the Office of Theology and Worship (PCUSA). *The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing*. Louisville: PCUSA, 2006. Lines 75-80.