

The 2nd Sunday in Lent
February 28, 2021

The Lessons: Genesis 17:1-9
 Psalm 22:23-31
 Romans 5:1-11
 Mark 8:27-38

The Hymns: # 611 (1,2,5) *Chief of Sinners Though I Be*
 # 563 (1,3,5) *Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness*
 # 420 (1,4,6) *Christ, the Life of All the Living*

The Collect: O God, You see that of ourselves we have no strength. By Your mighty power defend us from all adversities that may happen to the body and from all evil thoughts that may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ, Your son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen.

The Sermon:
 Our Sure Hope
 Lent 2
 Romans 5:1-11

“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

I. Learning from the Disciples

In today’s Gospel lesson from Mark chapter 8, Jesus’ ministry is just about at its peak by earthly standards: He’s been healing people and performing miracles. Crowds are following, and the momentum is building towards His Transfiguration. The disciples have been with Him for a while now. They’ve been listening to His teaching and observing His wonders; and, I would suggest, it’s been relatively easy to be a follower of Jesus so far. If someone comes to them for help, Jesus does the healing. If they’re caught in a storm, Jesus calms the waves. If they don’t have food, Jesus creates enough out of a little to feed 5000.

The disciples have been thinking this through. So when Jesus asks them who they believe Him to be, Peter has the answer for the group: “You are the Christ.” The disciples believe Him to be the long-promised Messiah, anointed by God to be the Savior. They’re absolutely right. However, they don’t have the whole picture yet, so Jesus fills them in on the rest. He tells them **HOW** the Messiah is going to save. He tells them that He will suffer many things, be betrayed, crucified, killed and raised again.

It’s too much—too much for Peter. That’s just not how the Messiah’s job description is supposed to go in his book. How do you go from immense crowds and miracles to mobs shouting “Crucify!”? Jesus is talking crazy, and Peter pulls Him aside to rebuke Him.

For his trouble, Peter hears Jesus call him “Satan:” “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

See, the things of man go like this: you follow God, and He overpowers all bad things to make your life go well. Suffering is replaced by glory, prosperity and success.

But the things of God are far different: God becomes man and dies for the sins of the world. He doesn't save by overpowering might, but by overwhelming sacrifice. Peter is thinking about salvation the way people always naturally do: in that scheme, the Messiah should be the popular, powerful guy. People want Jesus, but not the cross; miracles, not suffering. Everyone wants to get to heaven, but nobody wants to die. That's what Peter and the disciples are thinking. But as he tries to persuade Jesus to fit into that mold, he's doing the same thing Satan did in last week's Gospel lesson: he's trying to dissuade Jesus from saving you by His death on the cross.

Peter's not the only one who doesn't get it: none of the disciples do. Jesus will tell them again and again about His upcoming crucifixion, but they simply won't be able to get their minds around it. So when Good Friday arrives, they'll be shocked and unprepared. They'll suffer. They'll see themselves for the weaknesses they have, for the doubters and sinners that they are. But the Lord will not forsake them. When He rises again, He'll appear to them before the day is out. His first words will be words of peace, because He has died for their sin. He'll tell them they are right with God. They will be forever.

Observe the sequence. In our Gospel lesson, the disciples are cruising along, pretty well certain that following Jesus is an easy deal. He warns them of suffering and death, but it just doesn't seem possible during the good times. When the suffering comes, they're devastated. But because of the Lord's faithfulness—His death, resurrection and His restoring them, they have hope.

That's the hope for you in our epistle for today.

2. The Epistle for You

We can split our epistle lesson into two parts. St. Paul begins with all good news, so we will too: "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God."

You've been justified. Can't get off to a better start than that. For Jesus' sake, God has declared you "not guilty" of your sin. You're innocent in the eyes of God because Jesus bore your sin on the cross, and God declared Him guilty there. The price has been paid—the death sentence has been carried out. So God looks at you and says you're not guilty anymore.

Therefore, you have peace with God. Forgiven by Jesus, there's no sin left to leave you at odds with God. Therefore, He is at peace with you for Jesus' sake. He does nothing to you to harm you. He works all things for your good.

You stand in this grace. Judgment Day holds no fear for you. And you rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. You are the Lord's. Nothing can separate you from Him. Sin did before, but He's taken all of that sin away. So you have the certain hope that you will see God in His glory, live with Him forever in heaven.

That's all good news. It's all true, and it's all for you. That's the basis for your hope. But be careful: like the disciples in Mark 8, many have gotten the notion that all of this means that they can expect an easy life, that Christians are blessed from trial and trouble in this world because they are the Lord's.

Jesus pulled no punches when Peter told Him He should be the Savior without the cross: the Lord called Peter "Satan." Likewise, it is a satanic lie that the Christian should expect a carefree life in this world: why should Christians expect such a thing in a world that crucified Christ? Yet Satan loves to whisper that theology of glory: because then, when suffering does come along, it shocks us. It has the potential to devastate. It creates anxiety and doubt designed to turn you away from Christ.

Thus we're blessed with the next section of our epistle: Paul continues: "More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."

There will be suffering, setbacks and trouble. It is good for us to hear this from the Lord.

For one thing, suffering does not mean that the Lord has abandoned you. That is what the devil wants you to think: he would have you believe that God is punishing you for some un-forgiven sin, or has forsaken you. But trouble is no proof that you are forsaken. You have the Lord's Word, sealed with His blood, that He will not forsake you.

For another, the Lord then uses this for your good. He uses it to discipline: not to punish, but to train. Suffering produces endurance: it is when we suffer that we learn the faithfulness of God. We learn to repent of our trust in things and to call on the Lord for help. Thus we learn that it is by His grace and mercy that we endure.

Endurance produces character: in other words, by enduring suffering you stand as one who has stood the test. Be careful: to stand the test is not to say that you manage to grit your teeth and gut it out until the Lord says you've had enough. Rather, to stand the test is to remain the penitent child of God, the one who confesses his sins and trusts in the Lord for strength and deliverance. To stand the test is to not wrench matters out of God's hands and follow your own selfish temptations and desires, but to continue to live a life of repentance for sin, service to neighbor and trust in God. It is to commend all cares to the Lord and pray, "Thy will be done." And when you fail to do so, it is to confess that failure and trust in God's mercy again. All of that is the work of the Spirit, for faith is a gift that God gives. That's the character produced by enduring, by remaining in the faith during the time of trial.

Character produces hope. This is a great blessing, for it is a certain hope in the Lord's deliverance. Suffering teaches us to abandon trust in things and people, and throw ourselves only at the feet of God. Things fall apart, savings disappear, health goes away. People abandon us. Loved ones die. Security in this world is hard to come by; because no matter how carefully you plan and how hard you work, everything in this world is subject to the ravages of sin. You can't even trust yourself: even sometimes as you tell yourself to remain calm and think things through, you're ready to fly off the handle. There is, however, a blessing in this: trouble exposes our idols.

As much as things and people and security are gifts from God, they become idols when we depend on them rather than the God who gives them. Trouble teaches you the limits of the things of this world, tells you that you shouldn't put your hope in them: if you do, you'll be shamed when they fail to deliver you. It is a blessing to know this, because it is when idols are exposed that the faithfulness of God becomes apparent. God is not subject to the ravages of sin. He will not fail. Hope in Him is certain hope, because the Lord's faithfulness endures forever. He has poured His love into your heart through the Holy Spirit whom He has given to you.

That is the message of the second part of the epistle: the blessing of suffering is that it exposes the world for the sinful mess it is and points you to the faithfulness of your Savior. In Him is forgiveness of sins, strength for your faith and hope that will not disappoint.

The current troubles will pass. They'll be replaced by other times and other troubles. If you're experiencing a health crisis right now, recovery could well be on the way; at the same time, though, more trouble lies ahead for your physical health, because nothing in this world lasts forever. So trouble and suffering will come and go. When we are in heaven, it won't matter to us anymore. While we are still here, we are able to look back through all the struggles and say, "The Lord has always been faithful."

There's always hope: and the hope that you have will not disappoint. You can be sure of this, and that is the point of the third part of our epistle: "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

"While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." That's why you can be sure: your hope is sure solely because of Christ, and not because of you. Christ died while we were still sinners. He didn't die because there was anything cute or attractive or redeeming about you or me. In fact, the text goes on to say that we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son while we were His enemies. Salvation is yours solely by the mercy and grace of God, not by anything that you have done. This too is a blessing: you don't have to wonder if you're cute enough or attractive enough or good enough to be one for whom Christ died. There's no question: Christ died for you, because He died for all while we were yet sinners.

And if that is the love that God demonstrated to you while you were still lost in sin, how will He regard you now that you've been justified by the blood of Christ? You're no longer an enemy, but His beloved child. You're no longer unholy and impure, but cleansed and holy in His sight for Jesus' sake. The cross is your assurance that your hope will not fail.

As the season of Lent leads us toward the joy of Easter, it can symbolize our life in this dark world as we await the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. There will be darkness and there will be suffering. But every time you hear the absolution, that announcement of forgiveness is also a declaration that you are not forsaken by God, and you never will be. Every sign of the cross reminds you that the Lord has made you His beloved child, for Jesus' sake, in Holy Baptism: and because that price of your adoption was the cross, He will not abandon you now. Every time you receive the Lord's body and blood, you have the assurance that the Lord is not far away when trouble is near; rather, He is right there, with you,

to strengthen your faith and give you everlasting life. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.