

## Hope

### Romans 8:18-25

The Oxford Annotated Study Bible appends a note to Romans 8:18. To a verse that speaks of “sufferings”, the editors added this: “The Christian life has always involved suffering (this was more obviously true then than now)...” No doubt it was more true in the first century A.D. than in 1989, when that Bible was published. But 2020 might tip the suffering scale. For weeks on end cities across the land, from New York to Portland, Oregon, have had anarchists rioting in their streets. Racial tensions have flared again after the killing of yet more African-Americans at the hands of police. As of midnight Friday, COVID-19 had contributed to the deaths of 2,627 Hoosiers. On Tuesday, near Lansing, Michigan, Sean Ruiz entered a convenience store. Michigan's Governor Whitmer had issued a mandatory mask order. Ruiz would not comply, so the store refused to serve him. A seventy-seven year old man there called him a racist name. Ruiz stabbed him and fled.

Another customer called in Ruiz' vehicle description and a partial plate. A police deputy stopped him a few miles away. He jumped out of his car, carrying two knives and a screwdriver. When the officer ordered him to stop he rushed her. She shot and killed him. Such are the times in which we live. For months we have carried multiple burdens, each of which can sap our spirits. We've had more than enough. And yet the permutations and disputations just keep coming at us. Should we send our

children—and their teachers and support staff—back into school buildings next month? How realistic is it to look for a vaccine any time soon? Every question seems to divide us further. And we have not yet mentioned the presidential election.

The Christian life has always involved suffering. Most Christians have managed to hold onto their hope. Can we? Our passage from Romans represents a pivot for the Apostle Paul, its author. He has just completed a long section on God's decision to save us by grace. Left to ourselves humanity cannot obey God's law (see the opening paragraphs of today's sermon). But out of love, God came to us in the person of Jesus. He died a sacrificial lamb, freeing us from our bondage to sin and, when we have faith in him, offering us abundant life. Having contrasted bondage to sin to freedom in Christ, Paul now contrasts the hopelessness of those without faith to the hope of those in Christ. Today's sufferings, he writes, cannot compare to the glory coming our way.

Paul does not have an optimistic view of human nature. He notes that creation “was subjected to futility”. It was in “bondage to decay”. We groan as we await the birth of...what? Adoption and redemption. In the Jewish family of Paul's day only a male could inherit whatever estate his father had managed to amass. All Jewish married couples prayed for the birth of a son. Absent that blessed event, not even any daughters they might have had could receive the inheritance. But the Jews did develop two workarounds. If they did have at least one daughter, when she married her parents could adopt her husband and make him the heir. If they had no children, a

married couple could adopt a son, usually a younger son of another couple in their extended family. Though he could not inherit in his own house he could, upon adoption, inherit in another. When we apply this system to Paul's words in Romans 8 we see that when the Holy Spirit gives us faith Christ adopts us. We become spiritual heirs. But heirs to what? To redemption.

We do not often use the word redemption. To return to Michigan, there you get ten cents back on every plastic or glass bottle you recycle. Of course, you paid an extra ten cents per bottle when you bought it, so it's not as great of a deal as it first appears—unless you happen to be as committed to recycling as my friend Bill. An obsessive runner, Bill has kept running logs since the age of fifteen. He has proof that he has run enough miles to have circled the earth at the Equator—twice. And every time he goes for a run he stops and picks up every bottle he sees. The running shoes he prefers cost over \$125. He has paid for every pair he's bought since 1977 with bottle money. He goes to a **redemption** center (every supermarket in the state has one) and feeds those bottles into a recycling machine, one at a time. He **redeems** the bottles, then takes the receipt and exchanges it for cash at the checkout.

Though by nature we are no better than litter, Jesus picks us up and redeems us. He saves us. But instead of getting paid, he paid the price for our redemption. He did it out of love. He did it out of grace. The critical thing is, he did it. Because he did, we can have hope. We can hope for the abundant life in his Kingdom he promises us. That life has abundance both in the life which is to come, and here and now. We taste

it now. We have hope that Jesus' promises will prove true and we will experience the fullness of that abundance when we go to him.

I must offer a critique of two particular, common flavors of Christianity I have encountered wherever I have lived. I do so carefully, aware that my own flavor is imperfect. And I do so without judgment on the many people who seem content with their flavors. The one emphasizes personal salvation and tends to use the Bible as a kind of self-help manual. The other emphasizes social justice movements and tends to use the Bible as a position paper on the issues of the day. My critique is that each of these common flavors misses a significant part of the faith. I want it all. I want our faith to encompass both a bold witness to my salvation by my Savior **and** I want the teachings of Christ to apply directly to the issues.

We can hope in the face of the great sufferings of 2020 because we worship a risen Savior who redeemed us from the wages of sin, which is death. And we can maintain our hope even when we march out to face the troubles surrounding us. In fact, faith in the abundant life in Christ is the one unique thing we Christians can bring to the rest of our society. We **must** speak of our hope or things that need to get said will never reach the ears of those millions who need to hear them.

In the mid-1930s, as it became clear that Hitler and the Nazis threatened the peace of all Europe, courageous Christians spoke out against their evil. They did so knowing it put a target on their backs. Indeed, the Nazis executed many of these men

and women. In 1937, preaching from a Lutheran pulpit in an affluent suburb of Berlin, Pastor Martin Niemoeller preached a series of sermons so scathing and defiant the attendance in his congregation dropped to less than one tenth its usual level.

Niemoeller spoke the Gospel truth to power. And power listened. Arrested and tried (after a fashion), he was interred for over six years in concentration camps. But some brave soul—historians believe it may have been his wife, Pauline—smuggled those sermons to a London publisher. They hit print under the title, *The Gestapo Defied*.

Miraculously, Niemoeller survived the war. The miracle compounds when we learn that while in the camps he conducted secret worship services. In 1946 he published another book, *Sermons from Dachau*. Pastor Martin had served in U-boats during World War I. He supported the Nazis in their initial push to power, as did many Christian leaders. But when he saw that they merely used the language and facade of socialism as cover for their totalitarian program (the fatal flaw socialism has never solved), he had the integrity publicly to recant. He kept his faith. He kept his hope through it all. In a sermon on Romans 8, preached at the Dachau concentration camp, he said, “Yes, even here and now we can hope. The Apostle writes, 'Who hopes for what he sees?' Hope is for something not yet seen. We therefore hope even now for freedom—freedom from this place of Hell, and freedom in our spirits with Christ.”

I believe there are Martin Niemoellers among us here and now, Christian men and women of genuine faith speaking the Gospel truth to power. Without regard for their personal safety they bring hope to suffering people, and to a suffering nation.

Listen for them. Listen for the note of optimism in their voices. Listen for their wisdom as they unravel the seemingly impossible knots into which we've twisted ourselves. If in some poor, limited way I can sound like one of those voices, praise God. But I have fewer illusions than my younger self did. I do not see myself as a particularly gifted leader in social causes. I believe God has gifted me otherwise. So I will say it again: listen for those voices who bring a personal faith in a saving God to bear on the apparently intractable issues of our times.

If you find yourself drawn to issues surrounding peace and justice, go online and find Sojourners Magazine. If you find yourself thinking about capitalism, socialism and other political theories, find Christianity Today. (And I might add that if you read both, you will read principled, intelligent commentary from those two flavors of Christianity, the Evangelical right and the progressive left.) If you are moved by issues of racial inequality and justice, as I said last week, listen to black preachers who have risen to prominent pulpits. They have gotten where they are because they have proven they have staunch faith in Christ **and** they have the courage to speak out when necessary.

Voices of hope are out there. Keep your faith strong and your hope alive by listening to them. Tend your own fire. Nurture the spiritual gift of faith. Then apply your faith in Christ and your understanding of his teachings to those social causes that move you. Only we Christians can offer the message of hope entrusted to us. Let us go out there and do so.