

“Hope in a Season of Perplexity and Pain”

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Based upon Psalm 33:13-22 (ILV); Romans 5:1-8 (NRSV)

A few weeks ago, preacher Anna Carter Florence noted at the Festival of Homiletics that the Bible is sounding really different right now.¹ As Presbyterians, we believe that the Bible is the living word of God, not an ancient artifact from the past. The Spirit works through the words on the page to illuminate what we need to learn about God and faith in our specific contexts, which is why pastors can preach on the three-year Lectionary cycle of assigned texts over and over again and still find something new to say. But every once and a while, the events going on in the real world are so dramatic that it is almost as if they conspire with the Spirit to rewrite and highlight parts of the Bible. I know some pastors who have felt that this has been going on a lot in the last few years, making texts that once seemed entirely benign and apolitical sound political. But when Anna Carter Florence preached, it was the pandemic, not politics, that had done this for her, as she stared with Ezekiel at a valley of dry bones and thought about the impossible task of recovery ahead for our world.

That was only a few weeks ago. Since then George Floyd’s murder and the riots and the protests have added yet another layer of pressing urgency to the growing, life-threatening list of concerns our society is carrying right now. The eyes of the nation have been opened to things which have been happening for a long time, but many of us just didn’t see. Our hearts have been squeezed by shock and outrage, fear of and zeal for change. Perhaps that is why when I read today’s Lectionary text from *Romans* Chapter 5 this week, it didn’t sound to me like it always has. This time when I read Paul’s tidy little flowchart of faith: “suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope which does not disappoint,” instead of feeling comforted I felt irritated. “Isn’t this what has been said to people who are oppressed for centuries?” I thought. “Be patient; wait for change; don’t rock the boat.” Where was the Gospel message to fight for justice for all? The pandemic was also in this text and my irritation. “Do you really expect to comfort the many who are fighting for their lives against this virus, or who have lost loved ones, by telling them that their suffering will be worth it because in the end it will build good character?” I thought, arguing with Paul in my head. (Do you argue with the authors of the Scriptures when you read them? Preachers do this all the time.) Where was Christ’s call to step in and reduce the unacceptable suffering of our neighbors? How could there be hope without this?

“You’re just too riled up by the news,” I told myself. “Don’t bring your issues to the text. Let the text speak for itself.” So, I tried to set aside my concerns about racial injustice and inequitable suffering long enough to hear what Paul was really trying to say. But then the latent lawyer in me got involved. “‘Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character and character produces hope?’ Objection! Suffering does not always produce endurance and faith, sometimes it causes despair and loss of faith. Even John Calvin recognized that. He said

¹ Recordings of the May 18-22nd, 2020 virtual conference are available at <https://www.festivalofhomiletics.com>.

perseverance ‘is not the natural effect of tribulation; for we see that a great portion of mankind are thereby instigated to murmur against God, and even to curse His name.’² Similarly, I know plenty of people who, when forced to suffer for a long time, have ended up bitter and angry, not boasting of their good character and hope.”

What then to do? Our denomination has long approached the interpretation of the Scriptures with the understanding that some texts are so context-dependent that they no longer hold the same authority for us as others. For example, we don’t worry about wearing mixed fibers anymore even though *Leviticus* considered that an abomination. But I, for one, don’t feel comfortable just ignoring the heart of Paul’s argument in *Romans*, his greatest theological treatise for the early Church. He was trying to get at something important here that he not only preached, he believed and lived. So, I went back to the text again, this time looking at the Greek, and when I did I discovered, as is often the case, that something was lost in translation, something that at least to me, makes all the difference in both the tone and the truthfulness of this text.

The first step of Paul’s flowchart “endurance” is OK in the Greek. The word used can also be translated as “perseverance” or “patience,” but those ideas are sufficiently similar that they don’t really change the meaning substantially. In the next step, however, the word “character” is really misleading. In the Greek, the word is closer in meaning to “proof” than to a term that describes a good personality. Paul was saying that endurance produces evidence of some kind which proves something, which then in turn inspires hope. That’s important because it reveals that Paul was not arguing that if we want good character we should embrace suffering without objection. He was suggesting, as he explains a few verses later, that if and when we are able to endure long suffering, whether caused by injustice, persecution, or pain, the fact that we can endure it and not be defeated is evidence that God’s love has been given to us through the Holy Spirit, and knowing that God has been with us in that way is then what inspires hope for our future.

Paul learned this lesson the hard way. In *Second Corinthians*, he provides an astonishing list of abuses he endured because of persecution for his faith, and the challenges of the kind of life he was called to lead. On five different occasions he was lashed 39 times, three times beaten with rods, once stoned, three times shipwrecked. He was threatened at every turn, imprisoned often, hungry, thirsty, and naked more times than he could count. (2 Cor. 11:23-29). He should have been defeated long before he wrote *Romans*, his last letter; heck, he should have been dead several times over! But he wasn’t. In the midst of all that suffering his faith actually grew stronger because he discovered that God was never more with him than when he was suffering. “My power is perfected in weakness,” God told him. (2 Cor. 12:9). This is why Paul boasted of his suffering, not because he thought it was good for people to suffer, but because the fact that he was able to endure so much was evidence to him of both his intimacy with God, and God’s power to sustain and transform. For him, suffering really did lead to hope, with God’s help.

² See John Calvin’s Commentary on *Romans* in the Christian Classic Ethereal Library at https://www.ccel.org/c/calvin/comment3/comm_vol38/htm/ix.ii.htm.

Suffering led to hope for Nelson Mandela too, whose pain was caused not by religious persecution but by racial oppression.³ He was imprisoned for 27 years for daring to challenge the evil racial injustice of apartheid. He was kept in a cell so tiny it's enough to make one hyperventilate looking at it, and was treated worse than other prisoners because he was black. But 27 years later, after enduring physical and emotional abuse, and the heartbreak of missing watching his children and his grandchildren grow up, Mandela left prison filled with grace and peace, not bitterness and rage. He was still passionate about the need for justice for all, but instead of working against his persecutors, he worked with them to transform his nation and become its first black president. He not only endured his way into hope, he became a source of hope for those around him because of his perseverance, grace, and love.

Now some might say that Mandela is more the exception than the rule. Although he proved that Paul's flowchart wasn't a lie, that still doesn't mean that everybody can work their way through suffering with the same grace in the face of adversity. I don't dispute that. And I still believe that *Romans* 5:3 must never be imposed upon someone else because of that. It is offensive to use this text to glorify suffering, and inexcusable to use this text to justify oppression of any kind. But knowing that Paul and Mandela and many others have not only managed to endure the unendurable, they have retained hope in the midst of it, still makes me wonder if there are things that we all can do to help us find that kind of hope too. Although our suffering is inequitable right now across the world, most people are suffering to some degree. How can we nurture our intimacy with God in the midst of pain? What can we do with God's help to transform unavoidable suffering into an experience which both grounds us in hope and enables us to witness to it for others?

Pastor/author Brian McLaren offers an answer worth thinking about in a flowchart of his own that he includes in his book *Naked Spirituality*, which is about the common stages of faith development. McLaren argues that after moving through a season of simplicity in our faith, and then complexity, most believers find ourselves at one time or another in what he called "the season of perplexity," a time when simple answers no longer satisfy and our willingness to embrace the theological complexity of believing in a loving powerful God in a suffering world is stretched to the max.⁴ Maybe we, or a loved one, gets sick, or something bad happens to someone really good. Maybe we discover that things aren't the way we always assumed they were, or crises in the world make us wonder about God's presence and God's faithfulness. Whatever the trigger, seasons of perplexity usually begin with suffering and questions like "How long must I endure this pain?", or "When will this get better?", or "Where are you God? Do you not see what is going on?!" Then, if the suffering or confusion which prompts these questions continues, these desperate pleas are often replaced with cries of rage and refusal. "This is outrageous!" "What kind of a loving God would allow this?" "No more! No more!"⁵

I think in this pandemic, even the privileged among us probably reached this second stage about the time the news started reporting that in addition to the existential threat presented by the virus and the economic threat presented by the shutdown, we all should start worrying about

³ See *Biography of Nelson Mandela* at <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/content/page/biography>

⁴ McLaren, Brian D., *Naked Spirituality: A Life with God in 12 Simple Words* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011).

⁵ *Ibid* at 143-185.

murder hornets too. I know I did. “Are you kidding me!?” I cried. “No way! Enough!” In terms of the racial injustice, people of color reached this point long before George Floyd died, and the pandemic even began. As Baltimore-born and raised author Ta-Hesisi Coates describes in his book Between the World and Me, he didn’t have to be taught that suffering was part of the African American experience. He realized at age 7 that “his body was not his own,” and could be taken at any time with impunity whether he was good or not because of systemic racial injustice and its consequence.⁶ African Americans have been living for hundreds of years in the despair and rage that truth inspires. Asian and Latino people have for generations too.

McLaren’s flow chart of faith in a season of perplexity and pain goes from aspiration (seeking God), to exasperation, to desperation, to rage. I imagine even Mandela must have had to go through this sequence within the confines of his cell. But he didn’t stop there, and we don’t have to either if we allow our faith to help us embrace a simple, but important change in perspective. All of the prayers associated with the season of perplexity– the “How longs?” and the “Where are you’s?” are what McLaren calls “prayers of disorientation.”⁷ They don’t get us out of the mess, they just remind us of our helplessness and pain in it. If we want to move from a season of perplexity to the season of harmony that Paul and Mandela found therefore, we need to use our faith to pray for “reorientation” instead. Simply put, we need to move from complaining and raging to lamenting.

Prayers of lament usually start out with lots of complaining and raging. They name everything that is wrong with our lives and the world and the way God is managing or not managing things without mincing words. But they don’t stop there. They always end with an affirmation of faith: “Oh God I know you have helped others, please help me.” “Oh God who worked the impossible through Christ, I trust that even now you can make the impossible possible once more.” It seems like such a simple thing. But by praying this way, we remind ourselves that we are not alone, and have access to the transforming power of God’s love. And when we remember these things, the proofs of the past, then we are better able to see the proof of God’s sustaining grace in the present, which ultimately helps us both to endure and witness to hope.

This is a critical shift because as long as we feel that we are suffering alone, or that nothing will ever change, our ability to survive depends upon our inner resources which are limited. God’s grace, in contrast, is not limited. Our God’s very nature is justice and righteousness. Our God’s power is unmatched. If God can breathe life into dry bones, help Paul survive innumerable death threats and Mandela survive 27 years of imprisonment, no brokenness is beyond repair. When we are suffering, we only have to realize this, and it can make all the difference in the world even if the suffering does not immediately go away. This is why the theme of the General Assembly of our denomination, which will begin its first virtual assembly this Friday the 19th, was changed from “*Moving from Institution to Movement*,” to “*From Lament to Hope*.” We have a lot of corporate grieving and raging to do about the state of our world. But in order to be effective in challenging the racial injustice and healing the sick and reconciling the

⁶ Coates, Ta-Nehisi, Between the World and Me (Melbourne, The Text Pub. Co., 2015).

⁷ McLaren, Naked Spirituality at 172-177 (citing Walter Brueggemann).

divisions caused by politics and fear, we need to be solidly grounded in our belief in God's future with hope. Lamenting is the way to get there. It will get us to the point that we can be the instruments of reconciliation and hope Christ calls us to be.

In today's verses from *Psalms* 33, the psalmist acknowledges that many of the things in this world that we depend upon for strength can fail us. "A ruler isn't saved by the size of an army; a warrior doesn't escape because of strength. Trust in the horse for your deliverance and you'll be disappointed— despite its might it cannot save." (ILV). Depending upon our perspectives and our suffering, we might want to add to that list: our government, the systems of our society, our jobs, our bodies. But the psalm doesn't end with that pain. It ends with an affirmation: "The eyes of YHWH look on those who stand in reverence, on those who hope in God's love to rescue them from death, or to keep them alive during famine. And so we wait for YHWH, our help and our shield. For in you our hearts find joy; we trust in your holy Name. May your love be upon us, YHWH, as we place our hope in you" It isn't a prayer of passivity or resignation, one that says suffering and danger are in your mind, are what life's about, or are good for your character. It isn't a prayer which gets us off the hook from our call to challenge injustice and comfort those in pain. It is a prayer that names a truth that Paul and countless others have discovered themselves the hard way. The God who suffered the injustice and pain of the cross suffers with us still, and that makes all the difference. May the psalmist's prayer become our prayer in these difficult days, for there is work to be done. "May your love be upon us, YHWH, as we place our hope in you." Amen.