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## Open to Hope

We are in a sermon in a series on Paul's letters and what word they might have to speak to us today. This morning's text is a letter to the church in Rome. It is estimated that this letter was written in approximately 56 CE, only 20-something years after Jesus's ministry on earth. Paul is writing to the Roman church — a church he did not found and a church he has not yet visited. He writes to them from Corinth about an upcoming trip to Rome.<sup>1</sup>

Some commentators contend that Romans is the most systematic and comprehensive interpretation of Christianity we find in the New Testament. The letter takes for granted they already know a great deal about Jesus. It is not an introduction to faith, rather, it seeks to answer questions seasoned believers would have. Questions like:

- How is Christian faith related to Jewish Scriptures? How should Jews and Christians relate to each other?
- What are God's future intentions?
- How should Christians understand their ongoing encounters with sin and death?
- Can doubt be part of Christian life?<sup>2</sup>

Big questions.

The section of the letter I'm about to read is about suffering. More precisely, how do we square God's goodness with the suffering of the world?

This isn't Christianity 101. This is hard stuff of faith in the complicated and rarely clear cut world we live in. Just to be clear, we're not going to solve this theological difficulty today. It would take a sermon series all its own, if not a lifetime. But with the Spirit's help, I pray we might find a word of good news for us today.

Listen for the Word of God for us today:

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<sup>1</sup> Craddock, Fred B.; Boring, M. Eugene Boring. *The People's New Testament Commentary* (p. 468). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> David Hay in an introduction to the Book of Romans in: Birch, Bruce et al (eds). *Discipleship Study Bible*, Louisville: WJK, 2008. p. 1925.

## **Romans 8:22-30**

**18** I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. **19** For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God, **20** for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope **21** that the creation itself will be set free from its enslavement to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

**22** We know that the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labor, **23** and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. **24** For in[a] hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what one already sees? **25** But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

**26** Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes[b] with groanings [sighs] too deep for words. **27** And God,[c] who searches hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit[d] intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

**28** We know that all things work together[e] for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. **29** For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family.[f] **30** And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

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John Calvin — the father of Presbyterianism — says understanding the letter to the Romans has a key to understanding “all the most hidden treasures of scripture.”<sup>3</sup>

I have a friend who says that is true. He says that this letter of Paul saved his life. He doesn't lead with that when you meet him, it took me years to hear this story. One day over lunch I asked him how he ended up becoming a pastor as a second career after law. And he told me a story about losing his way as a young teenager. Like seriously losing his way, juvenile detention losing his way. “I came home from jail and I was totally lost,” he told me. “One night with no where else to turn I picked up my Bible.

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<sup>3</sup> David Hay. Discipleship Bible. p. 1925.

And I started reading Romans. I have no idea why I started reading Romans, but I did. And suddenly I understood grace. I got it. It saved my life.”

That’s the power of Paul’s letter to the Romans. Thanks be to God.

I haven’t had such a powerful conversion-like experience reading the Bible. Sometimes I’m jealous of those who have. But I experience another power in scripture that is equally life-shaping. It is what the philosopher Frederich Nietzsche (Nee-cha) called, “Long obedience in the same direction.”

Nietzsche wrote: “The essential thing ‘in heaven and earth’ is . . . that there should be long obedience in the same direction; there thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living.”<sup>4</sup>

“Long obedience in the same direction.” The day in, day out practice of trying to know God’s grace and to live God’s call upon our lives.

Few things challenge long obedience as the presence of suffering does. Apparently that was true in Paul’s day. The whole creation groans as they suffer together and wait for adoption and redemption.

It’s true today. It usually sounds something like this: How do we trust the goodness of salvation promised in Christ when we know the deep suffering of the world?

The suffering of a heart broken, of loneliness.

The suffering carried by Black bodies holding generations of trauma.

The suffering of a whole creation under the warming of our planet and the devastation that precipitates.

The suffering that comes with mental illness or drug addiction or poverty or...

I don’t need to go on. You know the suffering.

How do we believe in the goodness of salvation when we also know the suffering of the world? When it is our suffering?

Paul says the answer is hope.

Hope, the way Paul writes about it, isn’t flashy.

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<sup>4</sup> As quoted by Eugene Peterson in a book by this title. Peterson, Eugene H.. A Long Obedience in the Same Direction (The IVP Signature Collection) (p. 11). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

It isn't pat.  
It isn't even optimistic.  
It is bedrock.

One biblical scholar notes that Paul says a lot about hope in these few lines:<sup>5</sup>

- Paul is quite specific that you can only hope for that which you cannot see.
- Hope requires a willingness to trust that which we cannot prove, even when to do so might seem foolish.
- Paul links hope to endurance: Because hope is unseen it requires endurance.
- He suggests that while difficulty may not always produce hope, hope cannot emerge apart from difficulty.
- And paradoxically, Paul says groaning in the face of suffering may be a tangible expression of hope.

The hope he's talking about isn't the kind you embroider on a pillow or emblazon on a mug. It's much edgier than that.

When I was in seminary, one of my ethics professors was Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon. Dr. Cannon was the first Black Woman ordained in the PCUSA and one of the founders of Womanist theology. She was an unflinching teacher with an infectious laugh, the gift of storytelling, and a deep generosity with her students.

One afternoon during the semester I took Christian ethics, I came to Dr. Cannon's office hours for guidance. I wasn't struggling with the technical aspects of the course. I was struggling because when we started to look deeply into the ethic called forth by Christ and the actual goings on of the world, when we started to try to untangle the ethics of real life situations — well, the chasm between the world as it is and the world as God wants it to be, that chasm is large enough to swallow me whole.

I relayed my despair to Dr. Cannon. And I must have said something like, "It's all so intractable and wrong. Is there any hope that anything we do might make a difference?"

Dr. Cannon's eyes widened, she leaned her whole torso over her desk, got her face close to mine, looked me right in the eyes, and said, "Jessica, you know the hope is in the struggle."

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew Rindge - Exegetical Perspective, in Feasting on the Word. Year B, Vol 3. Bartlett, David and Barbara Brown Taylor (eds.) Louisville: WJK, 2009, p. 17

"The hope is in the struggle."

I left her office with that sort of strange sense that I had been given the gift of a deep truth while at the same time not fully understanding it. And to be honest, I think I'm still learning what she meant.

"The hope is in the struggle."

I've felt its truth most clearly in the moments since when I have been in the lowest lows, when events in my life have caused heart break, and sleepless nights, and brought me to my knees. Those moments have laid me most bare, and in them, I have also found a gritty, persistent, heartbeat of hope that seems to come from something deeper than I can articulate to you.

If I understand what Paul is saying about hope, it is that hope is in the struggle.

We hope when there is suffering, otherwise, there is no need.

We hope for that which we canNOT see...not yet.

We hope for that which the world might say is foolish, impossible, naive.

We hope with persistence, refusing to give in to cynicism.

We hope because the world is not yet what God desires for it to be, because in this world there is much too much suffering.

If I understand the text, what Paul asks of us is long obedience in the direction of hope.

Our long obedience is to point toward the promises of God,  
not just to point toward them, but to work toward them here and now,  
and to invite others along for the ride.

One of my favorite examples of this kind of hope that points and works toward the promises of God is CS Lewis's character Puddleglum the Marshwiggle, one of Narnia's fanciful creatures, who, truth be told, can teach us a lot about ourselves.<sup>6</sup>

In Lewis's [The Silver Chair](#), Prince Rilian is bewitched by a charm into service to the Queen of the Underworld. Aslan (the Christ figure in Lewis's fantasy world) sends Jill and Eustace to rescue Prince Rilian so that he can return to his rightful place as Prince of the Overland. Puddleglum accompanies Jill and Eustace on their quest.

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<sup>6</sup> Thanks to Bob Dunham for introducing me to Puddleglum when I was a student at UNC-CH.

The rescue party is successful. They find Prince Rilian, free him, and are about to escape when they encounter the Queen herself. With guile and enchantments she tries to persuade them that they need not escape, for the Underworld is all there is. There is no Overland, she says, except in their dreams. There is no sun, she insists, no Aslan, no Narnia. She has almost convinced them when Puddleglum finds hope in the struggle. With his bare feet he stamps out the fire on which the Queen has cast her enchanting powder. And then he speaks directly to the Queen in what I find to be a most eloquent example of the long obedience in hope that Paul calls us to.

"One word, Ma'am," he said, coming back from the fire; limping, because of the pain. "One word. All you've been saying is quite right, I shouldn't wonder. I'm a chap who always liked to know the worst and then put the best face I can on it. So I won't deny any of what you said. But there's one more thing to be said, even so. Suppose we have only dreamed, or made up, all those things – trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself. Suppose we have. Then all I can say is that, in that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones. Suppose this black pit of a kingdom of yours is the only world. Well, it strikes me as a pretty poor one. And that's a funny thing, when you come to think of it. We're just babies making up a game, if you're right. But four babies playing a game can make a play-world which licks your real world hollow. That's why I'm going to stand by the play world. I'm on Aslan's side even if there isn't any Aslan to lead it. I'm going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn't any Narnia. So, thanking you kindly for our supper, if these two gentlemen and the young lady are ready, we're leaving your court at once and setting out in the dark to spend our lives looking for Overland. Not that our lives will be very long, I should think; but that's a small loss if the world's as dull a place as you say."

It's risky, this hope in what we cannot see.

It's vulnerable.

It's flickers when suffering mounts.

And it demands we work in the here and now on behalf of God's promises.

Thanks be to God, we don't hope alone, but with and for each other.

Thanks be to God we have a church community where we practice this persistent hope.

And thanks be to God the Spirit intercedes for us, to carry the burdens with us, and keep that heartbeat of hope alive.

Amen.