

The First Reading is Psalm 8:1-9:

¹ O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.

² Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.

³ When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
⁴ what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?

⁵ Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.

⁶ You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
⁷ all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
⁸ the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

⁹ O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

The Second Reading is Romans 5:1-5:

¹ Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³ And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and

character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

The Message is entitled, *Building Blocks*.

Hope was in short supply. We were living at the heart of imperial darkness, for the empire had a strangle hold on our lives. We feared the regime leader who declared himself God and Lord, especially when he flexed his despotic muscles, using fear to control all within his realm. He held power over us to determine whether we lived or died and we feared for our very lives.

This describes not only the reality of Christ followers in 1st Century Rome, but peoples through history who have feared for their lives under the tyranny of empires. This reality describes many fleeing their homes today in hopes of a life free from daily threats. This reality describes those whose chosen faith is at odds with the ideology of their homelands. This reality describes minorities of any and every kind that fear for their safety in systems of domination. This reality, fear for one's life, was present in 1st Century Rome and unfortunately continues to be present today for some in our own country and around the globe.

In times of trouble and ever-present fear, people don't need empty promises, false hopes or platitudes to make their already bad situation worse. People need a hope that can help them transcend their circumstances.

This is the hope described by the words of Apostle Paul to the church in Rome. Paul's words convey the building blocks of

hope for the dire circumstances of Christ followers in 1st Century Rome as well as for those of us in our day in age. And it doesn't matter whether the circumstances are communal, such as it was for the Christ followers in Rome, or whether the circumstances are personal, such a crisis of health or a relationship, a job loss or personal tragedy. Paul points us to a hope that does not disappoint no matter what our circumstances are.

The psalmist grounds Paul's words for us this morning, reminding us that God is sovereign. God has the final word, not the circumstances we face. The sovereign God whom we worship is not aloof or distant. This sovereign God is mindful of each and every one of us, which is mind boggling given that over 7 billion people populate this earth. God is mindful of you and me, and of this particular gathered community of faith. The psalmist reminds the people of God that they also have agency, for they are to be stewards of creation. Paul's words to the Christ followers in Rome also calls forth their agency, for they share in God's work through the way they navigate their dire circumstances.

"O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth," proclaims the psalmist and Paul summarizes his understanding of this Sovereign God saying, "Therefore." "Therefore," God acts first – through faithfulness, with generously poured love and with access to unmerited grace. God is the giver of these gifts – we are the recipients who are invited to respond to these God given gifts through our very lives. God acts first and then awaits our response.

Yet, we don't get very far into Paul's words this morning before we stumble given our 21st century ears. We understand that faith is a gift and that peace is possible with faith. We understand the grace offered through Christ, but then we hear the word "boast" and wonder what it could possibly mean. Why would we boast about anything, whether the hope of God's glory or our sufferings? Everything is a gift, so why would we boast?

The word "boast" has a negative connotation to our 21st century ears. We probably do not care for those whose boast. Boasting implies excessive pride and self-satisfaction in one's achievements. The word suggests that the one who is boasting always points to self, whether the "self" is an individual or an organization. "Wow, look at how great I am or how great we are!"

And if the word itself isn't a problem. Then there is the problem of suffering given its proximity to the word "boast." It's as if we should welcome or even seek suffering. As if suffering is good in and of itself for us and that if we don't suffer, then maybe we cannot possibly be as faithful as those who do. Suffering becomes a badge of honor for a believer.

So, how are we to understand this Greek word translated as "boast" and apply it to our lives today? Thanks to the insights of those gathered for Sunrise this past Thursday, I did an intensive exploration of this Greek word to determine an appropriate translation for our 21st century context. And I have to admit that most translators just used a variation of the Greek word "boast." Here is a litany of the English words chosen by

translators instead of boast: brag, take pride, or glory, and rejoice, gladly, happy, or take joy.

Paired with suffering, none of these other words help much, either. I don't want to brag about suffering or rejoice in my sufferings or gladly suffer! It is only when translators paraphrase the whole sentence that we begin to have any insights that might be helpful:

“We continue to shout our praise even when we're hemmed in with troubles,” or

“And not only this, be at peace in our sufferings.”

Paul's, “Therefore,” suggests that there is something about our relationship with God that allows us to navigate and endure life's difficult circumstances and in doing so with God, transformation is possible. As I reflected on this passage, I was inspired to write my own paraphrase of Paul's five verses:

“God's faithfulness makes us whole by grace and in our wholeness with God, there is deep peace. Peace deep enough to help us endure whatever circumstances befall us. Peace deep enough to refine our character. Peace deep enough to birth hope, a hope that will not disappoint us. And why will this hope not disappoint? Because nothing, and I mean nothing, can separate us from God's love poured into our hearts through the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

How would you paraphrase these verses? What about your relationship with God has helped you endure difficult circumstances? How have difficult circumstances been a crucible for your character and lived faith? How has hope been forged in your life?

Guido Orefice is the main character in the Italian movie, *Life is Beautiful*. Guido, a Jewish Italian man, lives in Italy during the 1940's. He falls in love with Dora, a sweet Italian teacher engaged to someone else. Guido works hard to win her love. They get married and have a son, Giosue [pronounced Josuha]. Five years later, the family is sent to a concentration camp where Dora is separated from Guido and Giosue.

In an effort to save his [5-year-old] son, Guido makes up a ruse about the camp. He tells Giosue that this camp is part of a fun game. And the first person in the camp who earns a thousand points wins an army tank.

If Giosue follows directions, he earns points. If he hides from the guards, he earns extra points. But if he's disobedient, complains, or cries for his mother, he loses points. Giosue goes along with the game because he wants the tank.

Yet the longer they remain in the camp, the more disheartened Giosue becomes. He starts doubting his father and wants to quit. But Guido's relentless, continually admonishing Giosue to not give up because he's in the lead for the tank.

Although everyone in the camp endures the same conditions, Giosue has a different perspective. His father provides hope and works hard to keep Giosue's focus on the prize no matter how difficult the conditions become.

Just like Giosue, we can choose hope.

Just like Dan Brooks, who in 2007 was diagnosed with a degenerative muscle disease in the prime of his career as a school administrator and a musician, a singer and guitarist, chose hope. In the 12 years since his diagnosis, Dan continues

to chose hope. He has written a book about his journey, while advocating for others who are struggling with degenerative diseases. He has even cut another CD that he produced with his son. His hope is steadfast and secure in God's faithfulness.

Just like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who proclaimed to king Nebuchadnezzar, "If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let God deliver us. But, if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up." Their hope was firmly rooted in God's steadfast love.

Just like Jerry Sittser, who chose hope in the aftermath of tragic loss. The tragic death of his mother, his wife and one of his daughters in a head-on car crash. Jerry chose hope, even though his grief seemed insurmountable. In the crucible of this tragedy, he wrestled with God and experienced grace in ways he never imagined. He authored a book chronicling his journey entitled, *"A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss."*

Just like Ken Davis, a young man who endured and survived the Bataan Death March, spending three and half years in captivity in the Philippine Islands and Japan. His daughter, a pastoral colleague of mine from Los Ranchos Presbytery, wrote a book entitled, *"Forged by War,"* which chronicled her journey of retracing the steps of her father. As the story unfolds, she reflects on her father's faith and how it gave him the hope to endure as well as how his faith shaped hers.

Just like my dad, who in his late 40's had to completely retool his employment, because his line of work was no longer viable. No one needed a milkman anymore, given that grocery stores and convenience stores were on every corner, he used to say. Yet, during those years of transition for my dad, I experienced my dad as a person of hope. He didn't give up. He didn't sulk or despair. He simply forged a new path and found another way to support our family and eventually he found a job that he thoroughly enjoyed.

What men in your life chose hope? Whose story could you tell? How did their story inspire hope in you? On this day when we celebrate fathers, and all men of the church, I challenge you to remember and give thanks for the men who have helped shape your lives with hope. Remember these men... whether it was your dad or grandfather, your brother or uncle, a teacher or neighbor, a colleague or friend. Remember and give thanks by inspiring the hope that does not disappoint in others.

“Hope means believing in spite of the evidence, then watching the evidence change,” writes Jim Wallis. As we firmly grasp this hope that does not disappoint, I believe we will witness the evidence change within us and around us.

Let us hold fast to the building blocks of hope - God's faithfulness, generous love and unmerited grace, as we trust the Spirit is accompanying us in the crucible called life, where suffering can birth endurance, and endurance can refine character, and our character can rely on hope. Hold fast and then witness the miracle of the evidence changing. Amen.