***BLESSED ENDURANCE, JESUS IS MINE***

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Texts: Exodus 17:1-7 and Romans 5:1-11

 Rumor has it that in this holy season of Lent there is a certain college basketball tournament underway that is evoking fervent prayers from the faithful in arenas all around the country. Young men and women are seen folding their hands and raising their eyes heavenward as their team’s worst free throw shooter goes to the foul line with the score tied and the game in the balance. Pundits speak in holy tones about a *forgiving* rim and players who throw up a *prayer* and coaches who have *resurrected* their schools’ programs. Sadly not all embrace the holy nature of this season and continue to cheer for the Duke Blue ***Devils*** or Wake Forest ***Demon*** Deacons instead of the Providence ***Friars*** despite the obvious religious implications. Others have a more ***Cavalier*** attitude – which did not help last evening!

 Some years ago the coach of a small school in the tournament found his team overwhelmed and down by twenty points within the first ten minutes of the game; seeking to rally his despondent team he told them, “Boys, we have them just where we want them now: they’re supremely overconfident!” One might wonder whether Paul, like that coach, was trying to put a positive spin on a dire situation when he writes to the church in Rome, “suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us.” We may be suffering, but we are right where we want to be – on the way to hope! Is there really a path from suffering to hope that can be claimed by the followers of Jesus, as Paul suggests? Does that claim make any difference if you are the one suffering?

 The short answer to both questions is “Yes” and it is tempting to stop right there, say “Amen” and move on to the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism for our statement of faith. But the first question of the catechism presumes a faith-based answer to the questions raised by Paul’s letter. The catechism asks: *What is your only comfort in life and in death?* which is perhaps the follow up to the question Paul poses: *Is there* ***any*** *comfort,* ***any*** *hope, in life and in death and in suffering along the way?*

 Many of those to whom Paul wrote were well acquainted with persecution and suffering; they were searching for a glimmer of hope to sustain them in life, in suffering and in death. Hope is the stuff upon which lives are built, suffering endured, and death confronted for all of us. We live with hopes and dreams that we often take for granted until the hopes are dashed or the dreams shattered and the future suddenly looks bleak. Then the search for hope begins, the search for something upon which to build a new future from the ashes of the present and the pieces of shattered dreams.

 It is the hope you want to offer the parent who has just lost a child or the friend with a terminal illness or the sister whose marriage has just gone to pieces. It is the hope you desperately want to find after the death of your spouse or the loss of a job or the diagnosis of an illness that will not go away. It is the hope for which you grasp when an addiction grips you, or when your work has become just work and nothing more, or when the headlines repeat a cycle of despair from which you can see no way out. Most of us are not being persecuted, but we are well acquainted in one way or another with suffering and the search for hope. Just watch the news, read the paper, surf the web or talk with someone in the pew with you! Not much seems to be getting better these days and a whole lot seems to be getting worse. Where then is our hope, our comfort, our peace?

 In his essay *A Testament of Hope*, Martin Luther King Jr. writes of places where hope seems absent. He identifies the absence of hope as the catalyst for race riots in the 1960s, for one reaction to hopelessness is retributive or random violence. While expressing understanding for the plight and frustration of those who rioted, King does not share their sense of despair. He too suffered at the hands of those who hated the color of his skin, but he did not give up hope. In explaining his optimism, King writes:

*[Those who question my optimism] have no comprehension of the strength that comes from faith in God and man. It is possible for me to falter, but I am profoundly secure in my knowledge that God loves us; [God] has not worked out a design for our failure.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

King could endure any suffering, because he knew that hope in the Lord would not disappoint him, the love of God would not desert him, faith in God would not be in vain. He could persevere because he trusted that God would persevere with him.

 In the passage we read this morning from Exodus the people of Israel were not as sure about God’s perseverance. Though God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt, had led them through the Red Sea and crushed their Egyptian pursuers, had fed them in the wilderness with holy manna, had guided them each step of the way in a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, still the Israelites dared to doubt the faithfulness of the Lord. Thirsty in the desert they wondered whether the Lord would let them die there and dared to ask: “Is the Lord among us or not?” Instead of lifting up prayers for God’s saving grace, they quarreled with God and Moses. One wonders whether God was tempted to end it all right there, to vent divine anger at the whiny Israelites and start anew with some other people. But our God is a gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and so God saved the thirsty people. From a rock at Meribah God brought forth life-sustaining water that slaked the thirst of God’s ungrateful people.

 It is not the miracle of water that is the focus of the writer in Exodus; it is the faithfulness of God who saved the people. For, while the writer records in detail God’s instruction to Moses and God’s promise to bring forth water, the description of the event is recorded in these few words: “Moses did so.” More significant is the promise of God in the midst of the miracle: “I will be standing there in front of you...” In response to the people’s quarreling question as to whether or not God was among them still, the Lord offered a resounding, “YES!”

 That YES is the same response offered by Paul to that question of whether there is a path from suffering to hope. YES, he says, for the path through suffering to hope is a path we do not walk alone; God walks with us, perseveres with us, endures with us, for God knows that path well. It is a path Jesus walked through the taunts of the crowd and the beatings of soldiers and the excruciating pain of the cross. It is a path God has walked with generations of Christians, a path God promises to walk with you and with me, no matter how rocky it may be. Paul argues that because we are justified by faith, because we trust in God, we have peace in the midst of persecution, hope in the midst of despair, strength to endure any suffering. For, if God loved us enough to send Jesus to die for us on the cross while we were still sinners, God will hardly abandon us now, hardly allow God’s promises to remain unfulfilled, hardly leave us hopeless.

 We dare to hope in the midst of suffering because we trust God’s promises in Christ; it is trust that produces endurance, and endurance that builds character, and character that is marked by hope in the God who will not disappoint us even though we may disappoint God from time to time. The experience of Israel in the wilderness bears witness to God’s faithfulness and patient endurance with God’s people, even when they are unfaithful and extraordinarily whiny – as we may be from time to time! The good news of the cross and empty tomb testify to the limitless love God has for us, the lengths God will go to save us and to fulfill God’s promises for us. In that good news is our hope! In that good news is our comfort! In that good news is our power to persevere and to endure any suffering.

 Fanny Crosby once wrote that beloved song, *Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine*! but she might just as well have written, *Blessed Endurance, Jesus is Mine!* for it is in Jesus that we find God patiently enduring with us to save us and claim us as God’s own. And it is the assurance that we belong to Jesus that enables us to endure whatever may come our way. Perhaps no hymn bears greater testimony to Paul’s words and God’s promises than *It is Well with My Soul*. It was written in 1876 by a Presbyterian layman named Horatio Spafford. Spafford suffered the death of his son at age two and then was financially ruined in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. In 1873 he was planning to travel to Europe with his family by ship, but was delayed by business related to zoning problems arising from the Chicago fire, so he sent his wife and four daughters on ahead. While crossing the Atlantic, their ship collided with another ship and sank; all four daughters died. His wife Anna survived and sent him a telegram, “Saved alone…” Not long thereafter as Spafford traveled to meet his wife, his ship passed near the spot where his daughters died, and he was inspired to pen these words:

*When peace like a river attendeth my way,*

*when sorrows like sea billows roll,*

*whatever my lot, thou has taught me to say,*

*it is well, it is well with my soul.*

*It is well – with my soul; it is well, it is well with my soul.*

In the midst of suffering, in the trials of living, in the face of death, may his song be our song and his words our words, for by the grace of God through our Lord Jesus Christ, we do have hope, we do have peace, it ***is*** well with our souls! Amen

1. Martin Luther King Jr., “A Testament of Hope”, *The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr*., James M. Washington ed., HarperSanFrancisco:1986, p.314 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)