

Second Sunday in Lent: Romans 5:1–5

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Preached for the Third Sunday in Lent · 2020

I wanted to preach on Jesus and the sassy Samaritan from John this morning. It's one of my favorite stories, layered with meaning, rich in word play, double-talk, from above and from below, well water and living water pointing to baptismal water. But the present circumstances call for a different Word of God, a word of peace in the midst of uncertainty and turmoil, a word of hope in the midst of despair, a word of faith at a time when faith is tested, a word that speaks of rejoicing in suffering, and the patient endurance, character, and hope that God works in, with, and under suffering.

Our Epistle reading from St. Paul's letter to the Romans:

Rom. 5:1 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. 3 More than that, we rejoice 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 which has been given to us.

This week has been a trying week for all of us as we attempt to navigate our way through things many of us have never experienced before. Pandemic. Who even knew that word a month ago? Coronavirus. Or Covid-19. Or its proper name SARS-CoV-2. A respiratory virus that causes severe, acute, respiratory failure in the form of pneumonia. The directives from the government seem dire. Stay at home. Stay away from crowds. Don't touch each other. Every time someone sneezes or coughs, we wince. The elderly are vulnerable. Whole countries are in complete shut-down. Ours is likely next. The economy is reeling. And there isn't even a war! Who would have imagined this at the beginning of 2020 when all we had to worry about was impeachments and elections?

The enemy is not an ideological terrorist or a rogue nation but a microbe, a little protein coated genetic machine, invisible to the eye, not even really alive. A virus that jumped from

animal to human, which is a very short leap in the bio-world. At the beginning of Lent we heard the solemn words, “Dust you are and to the dust you will return.” And now the whole world is in on the Lenten message. We may not yet be toast, but we are dust, and this little spec of microbial mischief called SARS-CoV-2 has brought the world to its knees, whether in prayer or despair.

So where do we begin to get our lives oriented again? The text from Romans helps us. It puts our feet on a firm foundation. “Therefore, since we are justified by faith...” That is the bedrock under our wobbly feet. We are justified by faith. God has credited our faith in Jesus Christ as righteousness and declared us poor, mortal sinners justified. God is on our side, and if God is for us – and He is in Christ Jesus, His Son – then nothing in the world can be against us, including that little microbial spec named SARS-CoV-2.

You are justified before God through faith in Jesus Christ. You are right before God, holy, born from above, filled to overflowing with streams of living water – the Holy Spirit – welling up to eternal life. You are safe and secure even here and now.

Because you are justified, you have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. A peace the world cannot give. A peace that surpasses our understanding. “Peace, I leave you. My peace, I give you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” Peace. God’s shalom is yours through Christ. You have it. It’s there, deep within you, as Christ is within you.

The world offers no peace. Clearly. Nothing but anxiety, fear, panic. No peace. But there is a peace deep within the core of your being, where Christ dwells, for you no longer live but Christ lives within you. There is a peace, the fruit of the Spirit, that is unshakably there even when the world seems to be falling apart. No pandemic can disturb this peace. No even death and the grave can rob you of this peace. This is the peace of Jesus who overcame sin and death.

Through Christ we have access to the grace of God in which we stand. Access. A whole access pass to our good and gracious Father in heaven who loves to give good gifts to His children. You don’t need to bribe or bully your way in, you have access. We don’t need anyone to open the door for you. Christ has done that. Are you troubled, worried, afraid? You have access, my dear justified one, you have access to the Lord of heaven and earth, the Creator of all things, including by the way SARS-CoV-2. It’s one of God’s created things too. It likely does some

great good in the greater intricately woven scheme of things, but lodged in our lungs it's up to no good. You have access.

That means pray. Come to your dear Father in heaven as dear children and pray, "Father in heaven, deliver us from this evil" Before you go running off to buy toilet paper or whatever, before you panic over public service announcements, before you sit glued the news on television, pray. You're a priest to God. It's your priesthood. Pray for the community, for the nation, for the world, for leaders, for scientists, for medical workers, for your neighbor. Pray. You have access to the grace of God in Christ Jesus.

Further, we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. We rejoice. Yes, that's right. While the world goes into a panic and cleans out Cosco, we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. We know the worst that epidemics and pandemics can do. And yet we rejoice because we know that not even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Christ has died; Christ has risen; Christ will raise us from the dead, and so we have hope in the glory of God even as the glory of this world fades into nothing.

More. We rejoice in our sufferings. Now we're getting to the point at hand. We rejoice in our sufferings. There is going to be suffering, Economic suffering. Societal suffering. Medical suffering. Spiritual suffering. Some may get sick; some may die. We will be challenged, tested, pushed. We're not used to suffering. We've created an artificial, bubble-wrapped world that has no suffering. A suburbia where nothing bad ever happens. A gated community where none of the bad guys can get in. Then a little virus particle, 120 nm in size, that's 4.7 millionth's of an inch, snuck past our locked gates and turned our security got flipped upside down. We thought we could escape suffering by living in the suburbs. We were wrong.

We rejoice in our sufferings. Why? Because suffering is God's canvas, His raw material, His lump of clay. It's the fire by which is refines our ore. God works through suffering. Just ask Jesus, the Man of sorrows and suffering. God worked your salvation through His suffering. And He will work good through your suffering too.

What good? Suffering produces patient endurance. Hypomene, the primary virtue of faith. Steadfast, solid, endurance. Like the legs of a marathon runner trained to endure pain. No pain, no gain they say in the gym. No suffering, no patience. Have you ever prayed, "Lord, give me more patience." Be careful! This is how He does it. He sends suffering.

You build endurance by testing and pushing – one mile, two miles, five miles, ten. Five more pushups. Ten more situps. Feel that burn. This is how faith's muscle is built. We will emerge from this stronger in faith, able to endure greater times of testing, which will undoubtedly come to us individually, congregationally, and as a community. Our older people remember the Depression, the epidemics of the past, the world wars. My mother tells stories of living in wartime Germany with Allied bombs falling in her neighborhood. They endured. They became strong. They lived off their gardens. They sang songs. I see that in my mother today at the age of 91, that strength of endurance built up through suffering.

Endurance produces character. Backbone. Inner strength of spirit. Not the showy muscles of the body-builders but deep core strength that supports the backbone and causes you to stand up straight and tall. Pilates for the soul. Suffering does that. It may bring you to your knees, but God will lift you up and stand you tall in His strength. You never find a person of deep spiritual character who has not suffered. Saints aren't produced in easy chairs. We will emerge from this with a strength of character we could have achieved in any other way.

Character produces hope. Hope is the future eyes of faith. Faith looks forward in hope. It may seem dark today, but there is a ray of light breaking on the horizon. There is a coming Day to end the days when days like our days will be no more, when sickness will be no more, when death and dying will be no more, and Christ will be all in all and we will see Him in His glory and be seen glorified in Him. And our present sufferings, these sufferings we experience now, do not compare in the least with the glory that will be revealed in us on the Day of our Lord. You can bank on it. It is as sure as Jesus risen from the dead is sure. There is hope, my brothers, my sisters, there is hope because there is Christ. And He will not disappoint us or put us to shame.

God's love has been poured into your hearts, the Holy Spirit. A stream of living water has been poured into us even as it was poured over us in Baptism. The sassy Samaritan came to Jacob's well at high noon to get some well water for herself and her family. And she encountered a thirsty Jew who promised her living water, water teeming with the Spirit and life.

Come to Jesus, and you will never thirst. Come to Jesus, and you will never hunger. Come to Jesus, and no virus can lay you any lower than the grave from which Jesus will raise you up again. Come to Jesus, with all your fears and anxieties, with your sins and sorrows and sicknesses. Come to Jesus trusting in Him and you will find peace, shalom for your souls, no matter what goes on in this world, no matter what goes on in your lives, no matter what the

nightly news is blaring into your living room. Come to Jesus, all of you weary and burdened, and He will give you rest, and a peace that surpasses understanding.

We have a unique gift to bring to our community to our friends and family, to those around us who are troubled and frightened. We can bring calm and peace. We can show the world how justified for Jesus' sake people act. We can care for one another, be kind, gracious, gentle, forgiving. If we're going to make a run on the stores for toilet paper or other necessities, let's do it for an elderly couple or a single mother and not just for ourselves. Let's not hoard, but share in the bounty God has given us. Let's view this present moment as an opportunity to do God's goodness and mercy in this world.

Luther, writing at a time of epidemic said that the strong must walk together with the weak and watch out for them. St. Paul wrote to bear one another's burdens, be as Simon of Cyrene shouldering the cross of Jesus. There are so many little things and opportunities to do in these next few weeks where you and I as the children of God can make a profound difference by being calm, at peace, and blessing those around us. I heard of an elderly couple who sat in their car clutching a shopping list and a wad of cash, waiting for the right person to come along. They were afraid to go into the store, and were looking for someone they could trust with their money and their list. Be that person when you get the chance.

That sassy Samaritan woman, with a marriage track record a mile long, never expected to meet the Messiah, her Savior, that day at high noon when she came to Jacob's well. And when she met Him, He came to her as a tired, dusty, thirsty traveler, a Jew no less, the most unlikely messiah she could ever hope to meet. The Jesus who meets you in Word and Supper is there for you to serve in your neighbor, in the least and lost, that frightened elderly couple, that woman trying to take care of her kids, that man in the ditch at the side of the road, There is Christ for you to serve.

Luther wrote: "If it were Christ or His mother who were laid low by illness, everybody would be so solicitous and would gladly become a servant or helper. Everyone would want to be bold and fearless; nobody would flee but everyone would come running. And yet they don't hear what Christ Himself says, 'As you did this to one of the least, you did it to me' (Mt 25). When He speaks of the greatest commandment he says, "The other commandment is like unto it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself." There you hear that the command to love your neighbor is equal to the greatest commandment to love God, and what you do or fail to do for your neighbor means doing the same to God. If you wish to serve Christ and to wait on him, very

well, you have your sick neighbor close at hand. Got to him and serve him, and you will find Christ in him, not outwardly but in his word...”

We are justified through faith in Christ. We have access to God in His grace. We rejoice in our sufferings and the endurance, character, and hope it works in us. And we have peace, not only for ourselves, but for those around us, for our communities, for the world.

I heard a story from this week. An elderly couple sat huddled in their car in a grocery store parking lot. They were afraid to go into the store with all the crowds and chaos. They sat there with a shopping list in one hand and a roll of twenty dollar bills in the other, waiting for someone to come along whom they could trust with their shopping list and their money. When you go to the store, be that person.

Trust Christ to see us through this. Love one another. Do God’s goodness and mercy. Christ has served you here, now go and serve Him in your neighbor.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), “Romans 5:1-5 (3 Lent 2020)”, posted 2020-03-16 (<https://htlcms.org/2020/03/romans-51-5-3-lent-2020/>).