

“From Suffering to Hope”

Rev. Debra Given, the Presbyterian Church in Leonia
March 23, 2014 Lent 3A (Service for Healing and Wholeness)

Exodus 17:1-7

Romans 5:1-11

When I was a college student, I got a job in the summer with my church, helping the youth pastor take groups of teenagers on wilderness trips. We took a five-day hike on Mt. Marcy in the Adirondack Mountains, as an easy warm-up. Then we canoed through the Fulton Chain Lakes. That was great, except that it rained every day and everyone was cold and wet, and I hadn't packed enough food for the voracious appetites of our teenage boys. The last outing we packed more food, and had better weather. But this one was more ambitious. It was a two-week hike in the White Mountains over Mt. Washington. And by the end of that trip, the youth pastor and I were barely speaking to each other.

This youth pastor was not an experienced hiker. But he was the one in charge, and he was too laid back in my opinion. I was not happy that we had gotten ourselves into some dangerous situations. At one point he had miscalculated the time and we were caught on the side of a mountain in the dark, at least a mile or two from our destination. I can't remember whether we ended up making camp along the trail with no place flat enough to spread our tents, and no water, or whether we kept hiking in the dark. Whatever happened, it wasn't good. I've never been great at handling conflicts, and so I just let my frustration and anger build up, and did a lot of quarreling and complaining on the side. It wasn't exactly helpful.

In the story Suzanne read this morning from the book of Exodus, the people were also complaining. Moses had led them out of slavery in Egypt through the Red Sea, straight into the wilderness. In today's story they were camping in a place with no water, and they complained to Moses, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” They really were afraid they would die of thirst, and they got so agitated they were ready to stone Moses. Instead of talking or praying together, they complained and quarreled. They blamed Moses, and turned it into a test of God. Fix this problem, or we will kill our leader, go back to Egypt and forget about this God!

Whenever we face some kind of hardship or suffering, it's a natural instinct to get angry and start doubting. This is not necessarily bad. God gave us these instincts for a reason, and doubt and anger can be helpful. Sometimes we may be going in the wrong direction. You don't want to endure suffering if you can do something about it. And you don't want to be wandering in the wilderness if it's not going to lead anywhere good. Doubt and anger can give us the insight and energy to make changes that need to happen.

But often there is no way to stop suffering, and we just need to be patient and endure. And suffering can be an occasion to grow spiritually. John Koenig wrote in “Practicing Our Faith,” that suffering is an opportunity to rethink what is important in life, and let go of any frivolous or misguided ways. Suffering brings us closer to the people we love, and therefore closer to God (page 149).

How do you react to hardship and suffering? Do you groan and complain? Do you look for someone to blame? Do you fight against it? Deny it? Accept it as your lot in life? Or do you endure, but look for opportunities to come closer to God?

In the scripture passage that Susan read from Romans this morning, Paul talked about the fruits of suffering. It seems that Paul had critics who tried to discredit him by claiming he had suffered too much for anyone to believe that God was with him. If God was on his side, why did he have so many enemies, and end up in jail so often?

But Paul turned that argument against them. He claimed that suffering is not a sign of God's disapproval or absence. God suffers too. Jesus died on a cross! That counts as suffering! So instead of quarreling and complaining we can boast or rejoice in our suffering, because it unites us with Christ. It also provides an opportunity to mature in hope. As Paul wrote, "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope ..."

Is it true that suffering produces hope? Is suffering good for us, something to be proud of? Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher, wrote, "That which does not kill us makes us stronger." And a few years ago Kelly Clarkson turned those words into a defiant pop song "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." You broke up with me, but I'm stronger for it. My life is even better now. So there.

But it's not true that people always get stronger from hardship or suffering. If someone has been abused or traumatized badly enough, they don't always bounce back completely. And many people disabled by disease just get weaker and weaker. People can be permanently damaged by poverty, war and oppression, and God does not always provide personal relief or happiness. Suffering is not good in and of itself. We should never seek it out. But it does come to everyone as part of life. And as Christians we believe that when God is with us in suffering, suffering is never the end of the story.

Paul wrote, "...We boast in our suffering, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope," and then he added, "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."

We have hope because God's love has been poured into our hearts. When we have reached the limits of our own strength, love carries us and helps us endure the pain of life. And as we endure, love helps to form the moral qualities of our character. And as that character is strengthened and refined, love carries us back to God in hope.

At the end of our service today we will have prayers for healing and wholeness. When Jesus walked this earth, he healed people who were suffering, and demonstrated God's care for our whole selves, body, mind and spirit. Not everyone gets what they ask for in prayer today. But when we pray for healing something always happens, even if it isn't exactly what we asked for. We may receive healing or partial healing. We may receive a sign of God's love, or something we didn't ask for or even know we needed. And always when we pray, God is there with us. And so we come forward, open to whatever is possible for God to do in our lives. And along with healing we pray for endurance and character, love and hope, and the strength and courage to follow where God leads us.

When God's love is poured into our hearts we don't just pray for ourselves. We also pray for the healing of the world. Susan and Elin are going to tell you about the One Great Hour of Sharing offering that supports Disaster Assistance, Self Development of People and the Hunger Program, that helps people throughout the world to find hope in the midst of doubt, despair and suffering. That's just one way to show God's love in the world. And as people come forward for prayer today, may we hold each other in prayer and be a healing community of love and hope. Amen.

