

Suffering, endurance, character, hope
(Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42)
The Rev. Kyle Matthew Oliver

I'm breathing slightly easier this weekend than I have for the last few months. We have reached the end, at least as far as the calendar is concerned, of a marathon faith experience even longer than today's gospel passage. I call it the Third Quarter Blues.

When I arrived back on campus after Christmas break during my first year of seminary, a particularly blunt senior told me how things were about to go: "Third quarter is a straight-up miserable experience," he said. "It's cold, it's gray, it's long, it's Lent. Everybody just goes crazy." It turns out that seminary staff members are not immune to this malady, and I hope in the days ahead that some of my own crazy will dissipate.

I suspect all of us here are feeling the effects of something like the Third Quarter Blues—in our homes, schools, workplaces, and here at St. Paul's. The time has changed but not the weather, at least not reliably. Perhaps we're missing that object of our Lenten fast. We long for summer time off but can't yet see that light at the end of the tunnel. And of course, the long and exhausting work of a parish transition continues.

Call it March Malaise. Call it the Lenten Lull. Call it early "spring" in the mid-Atlantic, with spring firmly fixed, for now, in impatient quotation marks.

Maybe that's why today's epistle reading caught my eye despite the sheer volume of the gospel lesson. When it comes to *endurance* of any sort of affliction, our patron saint is quite the optimistic observer of human experience. Listen again to this progression he proposes: "[W]e also boast in our sufferings," he says, "knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us" (Romans 5:3b-5a).

Let's be clear that Paul is writing about sufferings that go well beyond the doldrums I've been describing. The word he uses¹ has at its root a sort of claustrophobia; it's the pressing in of forces upon us, maybe even the cliffs rising up to surround our dire straits. I don't have to tell most of you how difficult life can be.

Still, big or small, Paul says suffering is a valuable and even indispensable part of the Christian life. How can that be? Well, notice the way he frames his little formula for our spiritual

¹ [Θλίψις](#)

formation. Here's the passage one more time, but with the introductory and concluding verses restored to it:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, *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*. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 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*. (Romans 5:1-5)

We stand on God's grace. We share in God's glory. Our hearts are filled with God's love.

In this light, in the light of Christ and the power of the Spirit, suffering is redeemed by God's presence with us in the midst of it. If we boast in our sufferings, it should be because they are God's special time for being particularly present with us. Conversely, they are our special time to grow in trust, because we know we can't persevere on our own.

The verses that follow emphasize the lengths our God is willing to go for our redemption: "while we were still weak," Paul writes, "while we still were sinners," "while we were enemies," we were reconciled to God through Jesus's death and life.

Death and life, held together in the heart of God's Son amid the darkness of our tribulations. Let's call that redemptive suffering and not confuse it with its hopeless counterpart. *Unredeemed* suffering is suffering with blinders on. It's like reading those middle verses about suffering and character without their wider framing in God's bountiful grace.

In our reading from Exodus, the people of Israel are suffering with no eye on redemption: we read, "[they] thirsted there for water and the people complained against Moses and said, 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?'" (17:3).

They've already forgotten that they are there for "glorious purpose," [1] that God has delivered them from bondage and is leading them to a land of promise. Yes, they have trials to endure in the desert, but they seem blind to the many ways in which God is already caring for them there.

Unredeemed suffering can also come from mistaking random circumstance or cruel injustice for the will of God.

Consider the Samaritan woman Jesus speaks with at the well. I heard Bible scholars this week *plead* with preachers not to portray her as some serial adulterer or other notorious sinner. That conclusion simply isn't supported by what John tells us about her or by what Jesus says. It's more likely that she's a serial victim: five times divorced due to infertility, perhaps, or simply the whim of husbands who held near total power over her in that society.

Whatever her history, Jesus shows her it doesn't have to define her. Her redemption begins in the caring conversation he has with her—a woman, yes, and also a Samaritan. And it continues as he invites her to that sacred Gospel vocation: sharing with others the Good News of the Savior of the world.

Unredeemed suffering is living with no hope for better, living as if we were alone. It's trudging to the well each day without thought for the living water that will truly sustain and satisfy us. Unredeemed suffering is never God's will for us. And its fruit is not character but despair. Heaven make us free of it. Only heaven can.

Redemptive suffering, on the other hand, is how the Spirit works through the inevitable trials of our lives and uses them to shape us in God's image and draw us into renewed life in Christ. That's character.

We heard a story of redemptive suffering this week in our staff meeting. As many of you know, our parishioner Bob Cuniff is in his final days of a long and painful battle with cancer. Bob has been in the Pilgrims class this year and desired to be received into the Episcopal Church. On Tuesday, Sarah Stoycos accompanied Bishop Jim to the hospital to serve as Bob's sponsor in a bedside liturgy of reception. It's nice having a bishop around.

Before they began, Jim and Sarah met Bob's sisters, both of whom are Roman Catholic and one of whom is a nun. Bishop Jim asked them if they understood why Bob wanted to become an Episcopalian. While still loving the Catholic Church, Bob believed he had found his true home here. He believed he was on a deeply meaningful journey.

They said, yes, they understood, they were supportive. And so Jim asked them if they too would like to serve as presenters. Again they said yes. What a powerful sign of their love for their brother.

The service for confirmation and reception can be quite short if you strip it to the essentials. When they were finished, Bob said a few words.

He said first that these past few weeks had been among the most difficult times in his life but

that he could feel the presence of God there in the room. And he said this: that *that* experience had been *wonderful*.

Imagine that: I can feel God here with me in this hospital room, and that has been wonderful.

Hope did not disappoint our brother Bob. And Paul's Good News for us today is that, by the grace of God, it will not disappoint us either.

[1] I realized somewhere along the way that this phrase is from Loki in the Avengers. Go figure.