

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Trinity Sunday
Sunday, June 15, 2025

“And Hope Does Not Disappoint”
Romans 5:1-5

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

St. Paul writes: “And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope” (vv. 3-4).

The Rev. Felipe Martínez, a Presbyterian minister, writing about our Epistle Lesson, invites us to imagine this passage a little like a road trip. He comments that, when he needs to get somewhere on a tight schedule, he takes major highways; but when he has more time, he likes to explore the scenic backroads. And when it comes to this passage, he says, the temptation is to fly right through it to get to the end. He says: “When I read Romans 5 [...], I want to go from suffering to hope as quickly as possible. The words fly by me like scenery zooming past on the [highway]: ‘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 [...].’ I try to slow down but I can’t.” He adds, “The end is what I like about the passage. I am impatient, focused on reaching that hopeful part, [asking]: ‘Are we there yet?’”

Yet to really hear the grace of this passage, we can’t rush to the end; we need to linger at each point along the way. So, to help slow us down a bit, this minister invites us to imagine that each of these points are towns on the road trip of this passage—towns named Suffering, Endurance, Character, and Hope—as St. Paul offers directions for “a lost traveler looking for [that] town called Hope” (Martinez).

In our world, in our communities, in our congregation, too many reside in the town of Suffering; some have managed to move from Suffering to Endurance; others have made it from Endurance to Character; and others still have moved all the way to the town of Hope. And, though it’s encouraging to see those who have moved in that positive direction, it’s important to remember that the road between these towns flows in both directions. Sometimes, after a difficult stay in the crowded town of Suffering, we finally manage to get a place over in Endurance, start to settle down and make a life there...but then things don’t work out like we expected, and we end up having to pack it all up again and take that discouraging drive back to Suffering.

Certainly, some have made the journey in record time from the crowded streets of Suffering to the leafy avenues of Hope, but maybe that's not so common; very often, the journey is slow and unpredictable. I think back to a pastoral experience in one of the previous churches I served. When I first met a member of the congregation, they told me about a tragedy they'd experienced, and—the way they described it—with such raw emotion, I thought it had happened just weeks before; it wasn't until later that I realized it had been decades.

And when we meet those who feel trapped in the town of Suffering, it's always good to remember that people travel along this journey at their own pace, not at ours. It's also good to remember our own visits to Suffering; it's a place we have all been to, at one time or another, for short stays or long. Yet sometimes, when we leave Suffering behind, we can quickly lose sight of how hard it gets there; when things are going well for us, we can sometimes forget how hard it is to experience loss or grief, disappointment or setback, illness or injury...

And what's more, we can sometimes make the mistake of expecting others to conform to our own experiences on that journey. Maybe we bounced right back from a similar experience, and zipped along from Suffering to Hope, and that's wonderful; yet it's harmful to expect others to move as quickly as we did. I've seen this, for sure: 'I don't know why they're still on about that; same thing happened to me once, I never complained...'

Well—but our journey is not someone else's; others travel that road at different speeds. It's why we need patience when we meet fellow travelers on this road—why we need patience to care for those in the town of Suffering, no matter how long their stay.

And yet, in our Epistle Lesson, Paul promises that—in the end—we *will* be able to travel that road toward hope. But how? We know how hard it can get; we know that we can end up heading in the wrong direction; we know how distant the town of Hope can appear... So how can we do it? When we are in Suffering, how can we find the onramp toward Hope?

To be clear, Paul does not say that it's all up to us. In fact, that's the opposite of what Paul is saying. This is not 'whatever doesn't kill you only makes you stronger,' which is at best half-true but mostly misleading. (Often, what doesn't kill us leaves us weakened and wounded.) No, what Paul is telling us is that we are not alone on that journey from Suffering to Endurance to Character to Hope; on this journey, we are carried by God.

Paul is telling us that whenever we make it from Suffering to Hope—that's never merely our doing but always the working of the God who does not abandon us in our need. Paul is promising that, even when we feel we'll never make it out of Suffering, even then—God is able to carry us unexpectedly on that journey toward Hope. And how does God do this? Well, Paul says, by the working of the Trinity.

Today is Trinity Sunday—and today we see the Trinity at work to infuse our lives with hope. Paul tells us that, whenever we manage to take small steps from Suffering toward Hope, this is nothing less than the grace of God touching our lives; this means that the Triune God—who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is personally carrying us and redirecting us toward hope. Because in our Epistle Lesson, we hear of suffering—yet we hear of suffering bounded by grace, as God works to give us hope.

Our Epistle Lesson begins with peace and ends in hope—and all this comes to us through the Trinity. It begins at peace with God the Father through the Son: Paul writes, “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” (vv. 1-2). And from this place of peace, as we come inevitably to face suffering, Paul says, we will move toward hope: “we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God,” Paul says. “And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope” (vv. 2-4). So, we ask, how does this road go from Suffering to Hope? Paul answers: “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” (v. 5).

The way Paul explains this, suffering is at the centre of the passage—but that suffering is enfolded within the grace and kindness of God, the peace that is our beginning and the hope that is our ending, as the Trinity touches us in our struggles with God’s love in Christ poured out by the Spirit. How can we lost travellers make it from Suffering to Endurance to Character to Hope? The honest answer is, we can’t; but by the grace of the Trinity, our loving God carries us toward Hope.

You know, this is a really important passage for you to remember. Romans Chapter 5; remember that. If you are suffering now or in the future, this passage of Scripture is a profound help; it has certainly been a great help to me, since my first days of Christian faith in my early 20s right up till now. Because when we’re suffering, one of the hardest things is that we can feel like it will always be like this, like we’ll never get out, like we’ll never move out of Suffering...

Yet then we can remember this witness to the Trinity working in our lives, this promise that—because of the love and kindness of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—the town of Suffering will never be more than our temporary address. It turns out that, when we’re suffering, it means that we are on a road that leads, eventually, to hope. “[A]nd”—St. Paul says—“and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts.” Amen.