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On the Brink

Romans 5:1-5
Psalm 8

Psalm 8

*O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

*You have set your glory above the heavens.
Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.*

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?*

*Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honour.
You have given them dominion over the works of your
hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.*

*O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

Romans 5:1-5 (NRSV)

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.

The Word of the Lord...

Where do we go from 'Awesome'?

That was the title of the sermon last week and if you were here I hope you found all of the worship fit the title – awesome.

It was fitting that the worship was awesome – it was Pentecost. The paraments and banners and stoles and various outfits seen in the congregation were red. We gathered around the table of our Lord, sharing His feast and celebrated the gift of proclaiming the Word of God through song. We rejoiced with a group of eighth graders as they confirmed the baptismal vow that was taken on their behalf. It was awesome!

The rhythm of the church's liturgical seasons is one of the things I most appreciate about 'organized religion'. There is a pace to beginning with the expectation of Advent, the joy of Christmas, a brief respite and then moving towards the contemplations of Lent, the alleluias of Easter, Pentecost and today, Trinity Sunday.

This is the last Sunday before we enter the season where the paraments go green. We are on the brink of Ordinary Time.

Is it possible to be awesome in Ordinary Time? There are many of us, much like Peter when he witnessed the transfiguration of Jesus up on the mountain, who want to pitch a tent in awesome and stay there. Who needs all of that other stuff and especially, who needs Ordinary Time?

There are lessons to be learned and even comfort to be had from our calendars – both liturgical and personal. After a year spent transitioning from one town to another, job and house, and the death of my father I gotta tell you: I'm pretty okay with Ordinary Time.

Although the liturgical seasons do not always match where we are spiritually and emotionally, they do represent the gamut of human emotion. Just like the liturgical calendar, our lives have seasons.

We see these reflected in Scriptures from today's Psalm 8:

*O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your
foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.
When I look at your heavens, the work of
your fingers,
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You have given them dominion over the
works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the
seas.
O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

Yay, God!

But then there is Psalm 22:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I pray by day, but you do not answer; and by night but find no rest...

Boo, God.

Of course the very next Psalm is the 23rd:
The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.

*He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.
Yay, God!*

All three of these with their gamut of emotion and trust are attributed to the same person – David.

In the passage from Romans the Apostle Paul is doing his own interpretation of the journey we make in life: *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.*

This is one of those cheerleading passages you have to be careful with. It is true the pain endured in the earthly kingdom cannot compare to the joy of the eternal kingdom, but do me a favor, if I am suffering with my endurance being tested – by all means keep your 'rah, rah's ain't lifes' lessons great' to yourself.

I found it helpful when one of the commentaries on this passage said that the formula of 'suffering producing endurance producing character producing hope' was most likely *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive*.¹

The author of the article wrote that during one of his own life's trials one of his friends said to him, "Don't waste the pain." His friend was telling him to learn from his pain.

"It is true that we can learn from even our deepest pains and sufferings. Not that suffering is desirable or to be pursued, or to be wished on anyone, but that when pain comes, and it will, denial and avoidance are a waste. Life, health, hope can come even in the midst of suffering, out of learning to endure and growing in character."²

There is a popular sermon illustration that went around by email a while back that goes like this:

There was a man who was asleep one night in his cabin when suddenly his room filled with light and the Savior appeared. The Lord told the man there was work for him to do, and showed him a large rock in front of his cabin. The Lord explained that the man was to push against the rock with all his might. This the man did, day after day.

For many years he toiled from sun up to sun down, his shoulders set squarely against the cold, massive surface of the unmoving rock pushing with all his might. Each night the man returned to his cabin sore and worn out, feeling that his whole day had been spent in vain.

After awhile the man became very discouraged at his lack of progress. He became disheartened and he asked himself, "Why kill myself over this?" he thought. "I'll just put in my time, giving just the minimum of effort and that will be good enough."

And that he planned to do until one day he decided to make it a matter of Prayer and take his troubled thoughts to the Lord. "Lord" he said, "I have labored long and hard in your service, putting all my strength to do that which you have asked. Yet, after all this time, I have not even budged that rock a half an inch. What is wrong? Why am I failing?"

To this the Lord responded compassionately, "My friend, when long ago I asked you to serve me and you accepted, I told you that your task was to push against the rock with all your strength, which you have done. Never once did I mention to you that I expected you to move it. Your task was to push. And now you come to me, your strength spent, thinking that you have failed. But, is that really so?"

Look at yourself. Your arms are strong and muscled, your back brown, your hands are callused from constant pressure, and your legs have become massive and hard. Through opposition you have grown much and your abilities now surpass that which you used to have. Yet you haven't moved the rock. **BUT YOUR CALLING WAS TO BE OBEDIENT, TO PUSH AND TO EXERCISE YOUR FAITH AND TRUST IN MY WISDOM.**

This you have done. I, my friend, will now move the rock."

If you are standing in an awesome place with the Lord right now and in your life, even if you are in Ordinary Time, you can probably hear this message. But if you are in a personal Lent, this message may plummet from helpful to downright cruel.

We have all spent time pushing against that rock – some are in the midst of it right now. Truth is as pithy and clever as that story is, most of us don't want to be strong and muscled with our backs brown. "Guess what Lord, we are happy with pale and flabby and we just want to stop hurting. We do not want to be obedient. We do not want to exercise our faith and trust in God's wisdom. So Lord, if you can move the rock, then by all means save us all some trouble and please do so."

I wonder why the man in that story felt like he needed to push the rock alone?

When one is enduring and suffering it is hard if not impossible to hope. The majestic and sovereign God of Psalm 8 feels far away. And yet, even in that place, there is grace. Because each and every one of our journeys are different. And so when one is in lament and losing strength, another is content and can help.

As the community of faith our Call is to hold firm to one another and onto hope for one another in Christ Jesus our Lord. It comes in the doing – the meals, the phone calls and cards, the transportation, the prayer. It comes in the doing.

But even more so it comes in the being.
Being a presence.
Being a carrier of hope.

I sat in reverent silence recently as one friend spilled out her anguish at not being able to have a child. She is one of those women who is full of grace and positive energy, but after three years of trying, no answers offered from tests and only pain and disappointment being her rewards for continuing to follow what she believes God has placed on her heart, she is spent. "I am so tired and feel so empty and worn. I cannot even carry hope any more," she told us.

To which another friend responded, "Then let us carry that hope for you right now."

The gift from God and the charge to the community of faith is that when someone is broken, we carry them.

It is a story we have all heard and sportswriter, Rick Weinberg, tells it well. It is the story of Derek Redmond. He is not a household name by any means but "Redmond arrived at the 1992 Olympic Summer Games in Barcelona determined to win a medal in the 400. The color of the medal was meaningless; he just wanted to win one. Just one."

He had been forced to withdraw from the 400 at the 1988 Games in Seoul, only 10 minutes before the race, because of an Achilles tendon injury. He then underwent five surgeries over the next year. This was the same runner who had shattered the British 400-meter record at age 19. So when the 1992 Games arrived, this was his time, his moment, his stage, to show the world how good he was and who he was.

The day of the race arrives. The top four finishers in each of the two semifinal heats qualify for the Olympic final. The stadium is packed with 65,000 fans, bracing themselves for one of sport's greatest and most exciting spectacles. The race begins and Redmond breaks from the pack.

Down the backstretch, only 175 meters away from finishing, Redmond is a shoo-in to make the finals. Suddenly, he hears a pop. In his right hamstring. He pulls up lame, as if he had been shot.

His leg quivering, Redmond begins hopping on one leg, then slows down and falls to the track. As he lays on the track, clutching his right hamstring, a medical personnel unit runs toward him. At the same time, Jim Redmond (his father), seeing his son in trouble, races down from the top row of the stands, sidestepping people, bumping into others. He has no credential to be on the track, but all he thinks about is getting to his son, to help him up. "I wasn't going to be stopped by anyone," he later tells the media.

On the track, Redmond realizes his dream of an Olympic medal is gone. Tears run down his face. As the medical crew arrives with a stretcher, Redmond tells them, "No, there's no way I'm getting on that stretcher. I'm going to finish my race."

Then, in a moment that will live forever in the minds of millions, Redmond lifts himself to his feet, ever so slowly, and starts hobbling down the track. The other runners have finished the race, with Steve Lewis of the U.S. winning the contest in 44.50. Suddenly, everyone realizes that Redmond isn't dropping out of the race by hobbling off to the side of the track. No, he is actually continuing on one leg. He's going to attempt to hobble his way to the finish line. All by himself. All in the name of pride and heart.

Slowly, the crowd, in total disbelief, rises and begins to roar. One painful step at a time, each one a little slower and more painful than the one before, his face twisted with pain and tears, Redmond limps onward, and the crowd, many in tears, cheer him on.

Finally, with Derek refusing to surrender and painfully limping along the track, Jim reaches his son at the final curve, about 120 meters from the finish, and wraps his arm around his waist.

"I'm here, son," Jim says softly, hugging his boy. "We'll finish together." Derek puts his arms around his father's shoulders and sobs.

Together, arm in arm, father and son, with 65,000 people cheering, clapping and crying, finish the race, just as they vowed they would. A couple steps from the finish line, and with the crowd in an absolute frenzy, Jim releases the grip he has on his son, so Derek could cross the finish line by himself.³

It is not up to us to make it to the finish line alone.

We are not created to push up against a rock with no one to help us.

When hope is just a laughable word on our lips, it is okay to ask someone else to say it.

Our sovereign, majestic God has called us to be a people, a community of faith, that pushes when another cannot push,
that carries when another can no longer keep going,
that hopes when another cannot hope.

And that, Beloved Children of God, is awesome.

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. *Feasting on the Word*. Year B, Volume 1. Richard L. Sheffield. (Homiletical Perspective). p. 41.

² Ibid.

³ Rick Weinberg. <http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/espn25/story?page=moments/94>