

Hope

Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 86:11-13

Reading from the New Testament: Romans 8:12-25

When nighttime brain fog allows for not much more than channel surfing, I find myself bypassing network dramas, skipping professional corn hole tournaments, ignoring cable news flamethrowers, and only slowing down for car restorations and house rehabs. And whether it's a '65 Thunderbird or a split level mid-century modern, the shows typically share a common structure — initial excitement about potential and investment in the project is always followed by some crash-landing of glitches and unforeseen disasters — a subfloor is rotted, an alternator is toast, the plumbing's shot, or the axle is bent. Is the project a lost cause? Will the customer freak out? Will the mechanic quit? Cue the *Jaws* theme and a foghorn. *(As an aside, when the difficulty is discovered, I'd rather be working for Erin and Ben in Mississippi than Alison in Chicago.)*

The show formula, as with all reality media, prizes drama, and often manufactures it, but unlike the do-it-yourself shows of previous generations, the current shows don't deny the reality that even the pros run into problems. Seamless and smooth are adjectives seldom applicable to most human endeavors.

When shopping for used cars or well-seasoned houses, occasionally there will be a sign on the windshield or a statement in the listing that says something like: For sale — As Is. If you later find a crack in the foundation or bad bearings in the crankshaft, well, that's your problem. What you've bought is what you've got.

As Is. Rather synonymous with the human condition, wouldn't you say? Budding friendships suddenly challenged by the discovery of flaws previously hidden. Will the discovery derail the relationship? I once heard a friend confess, "I dated an extrovert, only to find out I married an introvert." Adjustment, flexibility, adaptation, patience, labor, and persistence are essential, not only to relationships but to life itself. Parents know it — the joy of birth is accompanied by a suitcase stuffed with vexing challenges, unrelenting anxiety, and a portfolio of pain, tears, grief, and wrinkles. There is fierce, boundless love, life-giving laughter, and the incomparable joy of seeing your children thrive, but the journey is never perfect because the travelers are never perfect. We enter this life As Is, and with apologies to Gershwin, the livin' is seldom easy.

Kids confront this the first time it is revealed to them that they cannot dictate what others do on the playground. Occasionally, I'll hear it in the neighborhood. The excited yelps of children racing around the yard turn suddenly angry and wounded. Nobody fell. No one is physically injured. Someone is enraged that their playmates will not bow to their will. I remember the periodic invitations of a friend for a sleepover. My anxiety would be measured by how long I could forestall the inevitable conflagration of the two brothers duking it out with one another. Adjustment, flexibility, adaptation, patience, labor, and persistence are essential, not only to relationships but to life itself. Some kids never assimilate these words as the world and those in it disappoint them, and eventually adult into that adjective by which they'll be known — insufferable.

Adjustment, flexibility, adaptation, patience, labor, and persistence. Even if you have absorbed these words into your character, you do not insulate yourself from trial or heartache or pain. We are all vulnerable to the notion that somehow in life we got gypped. Depending on our personality type we stew or we spew (stew — bury it in indigestion; spew — expect everyone with ears to hear to share the pain of our injustice). We think or

say, Hey, what's up? I've lived a decent life ... said my prayers ... given at the office ... worked hard ... wouldn't hurt a flea. So, why has this trouble, this pain, disaster come to me? It's ... not ... fair!!

Jesus confronts us with an uncomfortable truth when he says (in the Gospel of John): “In this world you will have trouble.”

A thousand verses of *How Great Thou Art* will not shield us from that reality. In this world we will have trouble. It's not as much about fairness in this world as it is about the fallen and flawed condition of the world. Being Christian does not shield us from trauma, trial, and tribulation. Remember, we follow One who endured the cross. Good people still get sick. Faithful disciples still encounter suffering, and our love for God will not guarantee this world's love for us.

Possessing one of the coolest names for a social commentator, the journalist and satirist, Malcom Muggeridge, contributed to introducing the West to the person and work of Mother Teresa, observed the forced famine of Ukraine by Stalin in the 1930s, served as a spy for MI6 during WWII, wrote for leading London newspapers, and even served for a time as Rector of the University of Edinburgh. Having converted to Christianity and having

observed firsthand the inhumanity of humanity, Muggeridge was in a unique position to speak to the Reformed doctrine of the total depravity of humanity. He said, “The depravity of man is at once the most empirically verifiable reality but at the same time the most intellectually resisted fact.” In other words, with total depravity, we observe it far more easily than we confess it, but it remains nigh impossible for us to deny it. There has never been an age when Yeats observation wouldn’t be timely: “The ceremony of innocence is drowned; The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.” The Psalmist knew it: “They have all fallen away; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.” The Apostle Paul knew it, not only did he quote that same psalm, but added this truth: “for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” John knew it: “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” Mark Twain knew it, “Man is the only animal that blushes, or needs to.”

Harald Poelchau knew it and witnessed it with nightmare inducing regularity. Prior to Nazi rule, there were approximately two to three executions annually in Germany. However in 1933, the year Hitler wrested control and began snuffing out opposition, there were 64 executions. In

1934, there were 79, and of course, Hitler's death machine was just getting warmed up. In 1933, Poelchau, a young pastor committed to social justice, began a new position at Tegel Prison, where he dedicated his ministry to the prisoners placed there. But soon he would find himself in the teeth of Hitler's hate machine. As the prison system became Hitler's repository for any who dared to criticize or oppose him, Poelchau's ministry was increasingly dominated by counseling and comforting doomed men. He began to lose count when the number passed 1000. (Tom Dunkel, *White Knights in the Black Orchestra*)

He would visit their cell in Tegel Prison the night before their execution, talking, praying, helping with farewell letters. 'How much time left?' A prisoner would ask. Poelchau would check his wristwatch. This would repeat as the minutes passed. Ask and check. Ask and check. He would walk with the prisoner to the transport van, and ride with him to the place of execution. What a wretched but hallowed responsibility to be that last friendly face, to be an instrument of grace in this world's deepest darkness. As Yeats observed, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." Each day, one can point to several news items offering evidence of Yeats' observation.

The cross of Christ confirms it. The offering of Christ answers it. The resurrection of Christ defeats it. Remember those words of Jesus I quoted earlier? “In this world you will have trouble.” That’s actually only part of the verse. The full verse reads, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

In our text today, the Apostle Paul celebrates this truth as he encourages Christ followers living in the brutal, authoritarian regime of Rome, a regime capable of persecution on a par with Hitler’s Nazi regime. Faith never denies the cross, but always looks to the dawn of resurrection hope. Paul says, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.” Hope transforms our capacity to meet the challenges of the day, to find beauty where we would never expect it, to have the strength to endure trauma, trial, and failure, to love an often unlovable world through the grace of Christ.

Jurgen Moltmann is a preeminent theologian whose works have had a profound impact upon scholars, seekers, skeptics, and disciples for over sixty years. At the age of 16, Moltmann was conscripted into the German army as Hitler was tossing ever younger German youth into the maelstrom of war. He was assigned to an anti-aircraft battery during the RAF bombing of his hometown of Hamburg, an operation that killed 40,000 people including the friend standing next to him.

Moltmann was taken as a prisoner of war and was first interred at a POW camp in Belgium. He had lost all hope in German culture as he became aware of and mortified by the atrocities of the Shoa. In the camp, an American chaplain gave him a New Testament, and in studying the Gospel of Mark his eyes were opened to the self-giving love of Christ and the way Jesus identified with the suffering. Recalling the fiery devastation of Hamburg, he said it was the first time he had cried out to God, but later, in reading Mark's depiction of Jesus' cry of dereliction on the cross, he could see Jesus as the divine brother who felt what Jurgen was feeling at that time. He says, "This saved me from self-destruction and desperation. And so, I came up with hope in a place where there was no expectation of returning home."

He said, "I didn't find Christ, he found me." Transferred to another prison camp, he was introduced to the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, and once released he entered University to study theology and deepened his understanding of the relationship between suffering and hope. With memories of war's terror and the subsequent societal unrest of the 60's, Moltmann began to contemplate the Psalmist's petition, "How can I sing the Lord's song in an alien land?" The answer was in Jesus Christ. He had experienced for himself Paul's truth, that suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us. His contemplation led to an important work on joy.

Moltmann observed that, "Hope, for him is anticipated joy, just as anxiety is anticipated terror." He acknowledges that today's society lives more by anxiety and terror than hope. When asked how one finds the way from anxiety and terror to joy, Moltmann says, "Whenever I feel the presence of God, my heart is lifted up, and I see more positively into the future, the coming of God. Thus hope is awakened in me." When asked, "Who is God for you?" Without hesitation, Moltmann says, "Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the human face of God. And without Jesus Christ I would not believe in God." He explains, "Looking at the catastrophes of nature and the

human catastrophes of history, I would not come upon the idea that God exists and this God is love. But with Jesus Christ and his message and his suffering on the cross, and his resurrection, my feeling that God is present in the midst of suffering is a firm trust in my heart.” (Interview - Jurgen Moltmann, *Yale Divinity School, Tübingen*)

That’s not just the observation of a renowned theologian, that is the lived reality of people you know and love, specifically our Youth who returned last week from the Montreat Youth Conference. If you did not read their reflections in the weekly email, go home and do not pass go before reading them. Our esteemed Youth elder, Collin Cushman, said, “I loved learning about how joy is not a destination; rather, it is a journey to discovering joy in and through Christ. I think of it like a train station because when you first get on the train and by the time you get off the train, you will feel different and be changed. The reason for this is not because you finally reached your destination from the train ride, but because of the journey you experienced on that train ride.”

In addition, Brooke Hicks, of that beloved quartet known far and wide as The Hicks Chicks, said, “God created us to live in community with each other and we need each other to help our joy grow and flourish. I have also

learned that God's joy is a defiant joy, meaning it defies apathy, hopelessness, and despair and seeks to work against the injustice of this world so that our world can be transformed. I learned that joy is the defiance of despair because God is the source and foundation of it."

I read that and thought, Dang! There's a sermon. Reading their reflections, paragraph after paragraph, I sensed the sacred presence of God whose love defiantly will not let us go. It's easy to be sucked down by societal cynicism. But a door has been opened for our youth to a train that can take them on a journey of hope where joy becomes a staple on the menu. Yes, there will be suffering, tears, and disappointment. That train arrived As Is, but remember what Rev. Hicks, Cameron, Kyle, Haley, Lily, and everyone else said, that joy is defiant on a train called hope. Which leads to one question, May we come along? Amen.