

6/17/20 Meghan Bathgate
Romans 5

Lord Jesus, thank you for this time of reflection. May your Spirit guide these words and our hearts as we meditate on your scripture.

I am going to begin by explaining how I came to begin this meditation. I believe this metacognitive moment is part of the story of what I am led to say today. In looking up the lectionary scriptures for this week, I was thrilled to see Genesis 18:1, where Sarah laughs at the idea of being a mother in older age. This intimate moment of humor and unexpected delight is among my favorite stories. SURELY, this is what I would focus on in this meditation!

But as I thought on it and reread the scriptures for the week, I kept returning to Romans 5: 1-8. I was somewhat reluctant. In fact, twice I returned to it with a literal giant sigh, knowing that is what I was feeling led to reflect on—and knowing that it would not be as easy.

Romans 5: 1-8 is a beautiful passage. It centers around hope. What could be better right? There is so much to talk about in these verses, but what I am going to ask us to reflect on today is this: “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.” ““Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope [...]”

In my educational research, I work with motivational models that describe the sequence of processes that lead to persistence. So, it is not so crazy that I choose to focus on this verse. But what changed for me reading it this week is *who* is persevering. It is, perhaps, easiest to think about this verse on an individual level: “Through my own suffering and endurance, and that produces my character, which produces my hope.” But I suggest that, right now, we are going through this on a national and global level. We are going through this as a community—both within and outside the Church. We are suffering, and we are enduring. Some of us are suffering more and have endured more. I am speaking both to the effects of COVID and of the racial turmoil ongoing in our nation—which are not disconnected. We need to listen to these stories. Then we need to do more than listen.

I would argue that, right now as a community, we are in the phase of building character. Through the endurance of the suffering we have faced, we are now making choices about who we want to be. We are deciding how to reopen churches and schools, which leads us to ask questions like, “Well, what do we really want from these experiences? What is essential to them?”

The status-quo is already interrupted, leaving us at a juncture of collective decision. To the racial disparities, we are at a point where we can discuss what it means to be human. To be a brother and sister. To be a neighbor. To love. We are coming face to face with the ways our values have played out in society, where they have not played out, and where they have become corrupted.

Now you might understand why I sighed so heavily in deciding to focus on this passage. But this is such a monumental, historical opportunity. So rarely—are we able to make such forward steps by having disruption in our assumptions of what day to day life entails. In some ways, we should be thankful for this. It is certainly exhausting not to have a “normal.” But “normal” was not fully living our God’s hope and love for many people. So I encourage us, individually and collectively, to consider what kind of character we are building and who we are becoming in this time of change.

And let’s not forget the hope. We see it cracking through. This hope will not disappoint us.

If this feels overwhelming, all this change and difficulty or endurance and character development, I’m with you. What makes it possible is what this passage ends with. “[...] 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.” God’s love is what allows us not to be disappointed or put to shame. We cannot rely on the world to do this, to produce this hope.

In fact, if we try to do this on our own, we will likely end up in the same place we were. Perhaps worse, having missed this opportunity. I encourage us to labor with love towards this hope. To define, with God’s guidance and strength, the character we are building as individuals, as a Church, as a local and national and global community.

As we endure, as we build and rebuild, may we build on the Cornerstone of our faith, of our hope, and of our love.