



"Moving the Needle"
Scripture – Romans 5:1-5
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, March 7, 2021

If you were around two weeks ago, there is a 10 percent chance that you remember I preached on the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. Rather than focusing on temptation, I honed in on wilderness as a metaphor for times when life is dark and unsettling. Most of us will remember 2020 as wilderness on steroids. The Covid-19 pandemic thrust all of us into a menacing environment, the likes of which we had never known. More events piled on and magnified the intensity of the wilderness. The deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Aubrey propelled protestors to the streets in cities across the nation, there was a resurgence of extremist groups on both the right and the left, the divide between political parties became a chasm, and the changing climate produced a record number of hurricanes and enormous wildfires. There was massive unemployment, a dramatic rise in opioid deaths, and the heart-wrenching plight of people were prevented from being with their loved ones in their dying days. One might wonder if it was a foretaste of the apocalypse.

Reflecting on ways to survive the wilderness, I pointed to the experience of Jesus. While no one would wish for such perilous moments, it certainly prepared him for the challenging days that were to come. He learned how to endure difficult times.

To become successful, we can hone our skills, add to our experience, muster a positive spirit, and make personal sacrifices. However, when life falls apart, we must have a capacity to **endure**.

Today we expand on endurance by examining the Apostle Paul's advice to the early Christians living in Rome. They were persecuted for the belief that Jesus, not Caesar, was the Son of God. Paul wrote, "Let us boast in our sufferings knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope."

Paul is not perverse. When he speaks of boasting about misery, he is not simply full of bluster: "Suffering? Bring it on! No problem." Rather, since he has routinely experienced agony first-hand, he seeks to boost the confidence and the fortitude of others by sharing the valuable lessons suffering has taught him.

Trace Haythorn, the Executive Director of the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education in Atlanta, works a great deal with chaplains. As you would imagine, chaplains are constantly dealing with people in pain. Haythorn reminds us that not only does *everyone* taste anguish, but there are various kinds of suffering – physical, emotional, social, and spiritual. Physical suffering is obvious. It could manifest in a migraine headache, a broken bone, or when the anesthesia wears off following surgery. Emotional suffering is spurred by psychological distress

and can produce depression, anxiety, grief, or addiction. Social suffering results from what political, economic, and institutional power does to people. This includes poverty, disease, discrimination, and war. Spiritual suffering can be intense feelings of guilt or feeling abandoned by God, or undergoing a crisis of faith.

Have you had calamity strike and found yourself asking "Why me?" Affliction usually provokes questions. I suspect all of us have asked "What did I do to deserve this?" Some wonder: Is God punishing me? Some questions simply have no answers. However, questions can also guide us toward deeper understandings. Many find that hardship alters the way they see things.

Stating the obvious, each of us views life and makes sense of the world from our unique perspective. Our parents, our environment, our education, and our faith all play prominent roles in shaping the way we view everything. Some view strangers with a wary eye. Others see strangers as potential friends. Some run roughshod over the natural world. Others see God's creation as a thing of beauty that needs our care. Some thrive on challenges. Others melt when obstacles arise.

Paul writes, "Let us boast in our sufferings knowing that suffering produces endurance." We need to be cautious how we interpret these words of Paul. If I thought Paul meant that suffering **always** produces endurance, I would take him to task. Hardship does not always fortify. Sometimes it breaks people.

Hardship can change the way we view life and make sense of the world. It can make us more callous to the pain of others, or more empathetic. It can cause us to become more passive and resigned to fate, or it can prompt us to become more assertive in shining light where there are shadows. Will the wilderness of 2020 drag us down into gloom, or will we choose to seek out joy and celebrate it? How we choose to respond to wilderness – and it is a choice – makes all the difference.

Further, we need not experience the wilderness alone. Paul did not address these words to individuals. He was writing to a community of faith. And we know from Paul's writings that he used the example of the human body to describe the church. It is comprised of arms and legs and hands and feet, and all parts of the body are dependent on one another.

There is no need to experience the wilderness as an isolated individual who must carry the entire burden. We have each other to lean on when darkness envelops us.

Retired Admiral, William McRaven, wrote in an op-ed that "For a would-be Navy SEAL, Hell Week is the worst week of the toughest military training in the world. It is six days of no sleep, constant physical and mental harassment, and one 'special day' at the Mud Flats...a swampy patch of terrain, a muddy bog, that tests your determination to be a SEAL."

"His training class had been out of the mud for a short period when the instructors ordered the entire group of 55 men back into the bog. The mud consumed each man until there was nothing visible but their heads. They were exhausted, numb from the cold and desperate to hold on. The instructors told them that they could all climb out of the mud – if five of them would just quit. The instructors wanted to see if they could turn the men against each other."

"Some of the trainees were about to give up. There were still eight hours to go before the sun rose - eight more hours of bone-chilling cold. At one point, a few men began moving toward the dry ground; they were ready to give up. And then, one voice began to echo through the night - one voice raised in song. It was out of tune, but

enthusiastic. One voice became two, and two became three, and before long the entire class was singing. The instructors threatened them with more time in the mud if they kept singing, but the singing did not stop. And those who were stuck in the mud believed that if a person could sing when he was freezing and up to his neck in mud, then maybe they could all make it through the night. And they did.”¹

It is far easier to endure the wilderness when we have others by our side who can lend us the courage and determination we need to handle the suffering life throws at us. Knowing that God’s Spirit is with us through the presence of others can make all the difference. Suffering **can** produce endurance, and endurance **can** produce character; especially when we commit to being there for each other.

Barbara Brown Taylor shares a story about the sheriff of her hometown of Clarkesville, Georgia. “Sheriff Joey Terrell was one of twenty community leaders who recently took part in a homegrown version of *Dancing with the Stars* to raise money for victims of domestic violence. He and his partner didn’t win, but everyone who watched them knew why Terrell’s shoulder was a bit stiff that night. A month earlier, he had been shot while responding to a domestic abuse call. When he learned that a former deputy of his was involved in the dispute, he went himself instead of sending someone else. He hoped that he might be able to talk the officer down, but he arrived too late. When he got there, the deputy had already killed his ex-wife and her new boyfriend and the daughter was hiding inside the house. It was the worst possible news.”

A month later, the town’s *Dancing with the Stars for Hope* was a sellout. More than 650 people packed into the high school gym. The benefit brought in more than \$64,000 in a single night – in a county where 21 percent of the population lives below the poverty line and the median income is \$39,000. Clearly, some people emptied the cookie jar to be there. This event enabled a local group call Circle of Hope to continue providing emergency shelter, legal advocacy, and counseling for abused women and children. Will that bring the former deputy’s ex-wife and her boyfriend back? Will it stop domestic violence? No, it won’t – but it kept people from feeling paralyzed. It moved the needle from ‘hopeless’ to ‘hopeful,’ for one night at least.”² And probably for a great deal longer.

As the Apostle Paul said, “Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.” May these words embolden you when you find yourself in the wilderness.

NOTES

1. William H. McRaven, “Thrown in the Mud,” *The Washington Post*, March 19, 2020.
2. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Always a Guest*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), p. 46.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of our Life — Through all the circling years, we trust in you ... You, who dwelled among us — healing the broken, welcoming the outcast, forgiving the sinner, lifting the lowly. You, who came that we might have life, and have it abundantly. You have drawn near to us. So, with boldness, we approach the throne of grace.

Compassionate God — You know our inmost hearts. So, in these quiet moments, we lay bare the pain that plagues us, the worry that consumes us, the grief that overwhelms us. We seek healing for ourselves and for others: for bodies aching from disease, or weary from the toll of daily demands; for minds riddled with invisible illness, or suffering the indignity of dementia; for spirits broken by stress, or heavy with despair. Surround all of us with your comfort, we pray, and breathe your sustaining spirit upon those we name before you in silence:

Gracious God — Your creation cries out for healing. As we pray for this world in need, break our hearts for what breaks yours. We lift before you communities that are in crisis and neighborhoods that suffer neglect, countries that are plagued by violence and a planet that is abused and exploited. As our global community continues to battle the Coronavirus, we pray for strength, for endurance, for relief. Almost a year into this pandemic, we remember those for whom the vaccines came too late and lift before you the loved ones left to grieve. We pray for those who have recovered from COVID, but suffer the lingering effects of illness; we pray for those who are physically well, but suffer because of systems that are unhealthy, unjust. God, send your healing spirit upon this, your world, and sustain us in hope.

Ever-Present God — You are no stranger to suffering. But — as the empty tomb gives witness — you do not let suffering have the final word. Dwell with us, we pray. Mend our brokenness; refresh our spirits. As we pray for healing, align our wills with your will, so that the story we tell with our lives may be a story of grace. By your Spirit — strengthen us, guide us, renew us, until our prayers give way to action, and our actions plant seeds of peace. Draw us into your work, O God, and shape our petitions into prophetic words— words that invite transformation and offer reconciliation.

This we pray in the name of our crucified and risen Lord, the one who taught us how to pray:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.