

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I was going to preach about water from the Rock, the Living Water that flows from Christ's side and washes our souls in Holy Baptism. But instead, I think the Word of God from Romans 5 that we heard on Sunday is more fitting. God works in the midst of suffering, and for this reason, we have hope.

So, let me read again a portion of St. Paul's epistle to the Romans:

5 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ² Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³ More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.

This week has been a flurry of uncertainty. We're trying to make our way through the difficulties of something we've never personally experienced. They're calling it "Pandemic." A global outbreak of contagious disease. Coronavirus. Or COVID-19. Or, to be precise, SARS-CoV-2. It's a virus that can cause respiratory distress, and ultimately, shutdown, and can leave you vulnerable to all sorts of other nasty side-effects. The government sounds the alarm. The media repeats it. We don't want to take their pronouncements *lightly*, since they have been charged by God to protect us. So we stay at home. Stay away from crowds. Don't touch each other. Don't touch your face. Every time someone sneezes or coughs, we wince. The elderly are vulnerable. Whole countries are in complete shut-down. Ours is likely next. The economy is on a downward spiral, and all that without a war! Who would have imagined, at the beginning of 2020, that Pandemic would supplant impeachments and elections?

Three weeks ago, we heard, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." And now the whole world seems to have taken up our Lenten *memento mori*, our remembrance of our mortality.

So how do we navigate these unfamiliar waters? The text from Romans gives us the chart. It gives us a beacon toward which we steer. It shows us how we are not the world, and the world is not the Church. "Therefore, since we are justified by faith...." Let *that* be the lighthouse to guide your voyage! You are justified by faith. God sees your faith in Jesus Christ, and counts it as though you are as righteous as Him. God is on your side, and if God is for you—and He is in Christ

Jesus, His Son—then nothing in the world can be against you, including that little blob of protein-covered RNA named SARS-CoV-2. You are safe, here, now, and will be until the Day of the consummation of all things.

And because you are justified, you have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. This is a peace which the world cannot give. It's a peace that passes all understanding. "Peace, I leave you. My peace, I give you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." Peace. God's peace is yours through Christ. You have it. It's within you because Christ is within you.

Now, I saw people urging you to put up your Christmas lights as a sign of hope. That's not bad. Christ has come into the world, which we celebrate at Christmas, to bring "peace on earth and goodwill among men." But I think the Easter lily is even better. On Easter evening, Christ breathed on His disciples (who, coincidentally, were self-isolating because of fear) and He said, "Peace be with you." That's the peace which you have. The peace of the risen Christ, the One who suffered the torments of the cross, the pains of the penalty of perdition, and He suffered them for you. He became God's enemy in your place, and now, He comes breathing peace on you. Peace with God. Peace with one another. Peace because the disciples have been sent out to speak the peace of absolution in your ears. Not fear. Not anxiety. Not panic. But peace. And it's yours, not because you feel it, not because you take a couple deep breaths, but because He says it, because by His Word He makes it yours.

And so we have access to God through Him. Never forget that because Christ has reconciled you to the Father, you have access to the same God who created heaven and earth and everything that fills them, and that includes the God who created SARS-CoV-2. Now, what purpose that little virus had in God's good creation, I don't rightly know. But even though it's been corrupted by the devil, twisted by our Sin, and up to no good when it lodges in our lungs, don't forget that God is the Creator. Don't be afraid! You have access to Him in Christ.

And because you have access, use it. Pray. Lift up your concerns to your dear Father in heaven as dear children and pray, "Father in heaven, deliver us from evil." Before you run out to buy toilet paper, before you panic over public announcements, before you sit glued the television news and comb your social media newsfeeds, pray. You're a priest to God, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. Pray for your family, for the community, for the nation, for the world, for leaders, for scientists, for healthcare workers, for your neighbor. Pray. You have access to God's throne of grace in Christ Jesus.

And while you're at it, rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Yes, that's right. While the world panics and clears out Walmart, we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. What's the worst that pandemics can do? Destroy the body. We rejoice because we know that not even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Christ has died; Christ has risen; Christ will raise us from the dead, and so we have hope in the glory of God even as the glory of this world passes away.

But more pointedly: We rejoice *in our sufferings*. Now we're getting to the point at hand. We rejoice in our sufferings. There's no doubt, there will be suffering, Economic, social, medical, even spiritual. Some people will get sick; some may die. We will be challenged, tested, pushed. We're not used to suffering. We think that we've created an artificial, bubble-wrapped world that has no suffering, a modern Utopia where nothing bad ever happens. But then, a little virus particle snuck past our security, just 120 nm in size (just for reference, if you lined them up side-by-side, you could fit 750 of them in the width of a human hair) and our world got flipped upside down. We thought we could escape suffering by moving to the Emerald City. We were wrong.

Nevertheless, we *rejoice* in our sufferings. Why? Because God is an artist, and suffering is His canvas. God is at work in suffering. If you need an example, just look at Jesus. He's the Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. If God can work through that, and pull salvation out the other side, then He can work good through your suffering too.

Now, St. Paul gives us this little chain. Suffering produces endurance. Like a runner, who sweats through the pain, who grinds through the miles, each one building up a tolerance to go farther. So suffering primes us to follow our Lord through even more, to endure even more, because our eyes are fixed on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him (and that means you—you are the joy set before Him) endured the cross, despising the shame (Hebrews 12:2).

And endurance, Paul says, produces character. It's the tendency of those who have endured suffering to persist, in faith, until the end. Saints aren't produced in easy chairs, but rather in the crucible of suffering. Luther called it *Anfechtung* or *Tentatio*. The monks used to say theologians were formed by prayer, meditation, and contemplation. But Luther revised the trio to be prayer, meditation, and *trial*. That's the fruit of faith. It's to be brought by God through suffering with a strength of character forged in furnace of trial, and to be all the stronger for it.

And finally, character produces hope. Hope is faith looking to the future. Today may seem dark, but hope isn't looking at today. Hope is looking toward the Day to end all days, the Day when Christ summons the living and the dead who believe in Him, wipes the tears from their eyes, and ushers them in to the Marriage Feast of the Lamb in His kingdom, which has no end. And what we are suffering now will be like a dream that has past, like dew that melts away in the morning. Hope isn't timid. Hope is confident. And Hope is confident because Christ has been raised from the dead. The world has no peace, nor does the world have hope, because the world does not have Christ in whom all peace, joy, and hope abound.

We are justified through faith in Christ. We have access to God in His grace. We rejoice in our sufferings and the endurance, character, and hope it works in us. And we have peace, not only for ourselves, but for those around us, for our communities, and for the world.

And now, dearly baptized saints of God, put your peace and hope to good use! The world needs you. Your neighbor needs you. Your brothers and sisters need you. Pray. And love. And rejoice. Trust God to provide for us. And trust God to provide for your neighbor through you.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:7). Amen.

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With thanks to Bill Cwirla, Hacienda Heights, CA