

La Verne Church of the Brethren  
July 26, 2020  
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Hope Does Not Disappoint  
Romans 5:3-5  
Isaiah 49:1-6

There is a story in my family about a time in my early childhood when I was about 3-years old, so I've been told. I was sitting in my Mom's lap watching the Glen Campbell Variety Hour. And when he began to sing, "By the time I get to Phoenix" my 3-year old self apparently dissolved into tears. I was sobbing because, "that man is so sad".

It became a favorite pastime of my older siblings to sing sad songs for the purpose of trying to make me cry. It wasn't hard then and it doesn't take much today - I mean that song, Holy World?? C'mon! Those of you who know me know that I'm a highly sensitive person. I was told once by an employer that I'm like an emotional canary in a coal mine. He said, "If Dawna is feeling unsettled or disturbed about something, there's a pretty good chance everyone else is too." I don't have to guess if that is still true. You have been sharing it with me. Some of you are feeling pretty overwhelmed, angry, sad and even a little hopeless right now. I get it!

As this pandemic wears on and on, we are wearing down. We are sick and tired of being stuck in our homes, and not being able to visit our parents living in retirement communities, hanging out with our friends, or hugging our grandchildren. We miss harmonizing with each other in this beautiful sanctuary and socializing on the patio after worship. We miss offering our home-baked bread to visitors and getting to know you in person. As cases of coronavirus continue to skyrocket, people are arguing about whether or not masks are necessary or useful. And our leaders are focused on the health of our economy instead of the staggering numbers of people who have already, and will continue to, lose their lives to this virus. It's almost too much to bear.

As consensus grows about the existence of systemic racism (the other pandemic), it is highlighting another stark division in America. We are dividing ourselves into "us" and "them" and being torn apart by ideological, political, and religious views. I have been shocked by the level of mistrust and anger spewed out on social media platforms. When I re-posted an image of the Speak Their Names, prayer flag installation on our church campus, someone I grew up with came at me hard with questions and accusations. I tried to acknowledge his pain and discomfort, answer his questions and engage in dialogue. But, my words couldn't cut through his anger and my attempts at a productive conversation totally missed the mark. Now, I know he wasn't looking to re-connect with an old friend or engage in honest discourse. He was looking to call out everything he is angry, sad and overwhelmed by right now. I did not take it personally. But, I did take it to heart. I felt like a failure.

That may sound like I'm being too hard on myself. But, I have been preparing for these types of conversations. One way I have been readying myself is by participating in weekly calls with Operation Ally, a group that is focused on a collective, comprehensive approach to change by engaging allies through education, strategies, and encouragement. I am very intentional about meeting people where they are. I work very hard at growing a bigger heart for people with whom I disagree or who disagree with me. So, if a sensitive, highly relational person who is actively trying to have difficult conversations, can't manage a civil one, who can?? It is almost too much to bear.

It is exactly from this space of defeat and despair that we meet the servant referred to in Isaiah 49. He knows that he is a child of God - called to serve the Lord before he was even born! But that just intensifies his guilt and feelings of failure. By his own description he was given "a mouth like a sharp sword" but his words fail to cut through anything! He was made like a "polished arrow" but he can't hit the target. "I have labored in vain," he says, "I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity." I don't know what Isaiah was expecting from this confession. Maybe to be fired? To be relieved of his responsibilities and replaced by someone much more capable, perhaps? But, God has a different plan. God says to his servant, "I will make you as a light for the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." Wow! This Isaiah character must have been thinking, "Uh...? I can't even light my little corner of the neighborhood and you want me to light up the world?" Apparently, in God's eyes the only way we can truly fail is to not show up! And so I wonder, what if our lives as servants of God has nothing to do with how much we accomplish or how many productive conversations we have? But instead, what is important to God is our presence- how we show up.

I know how you're showing up! You volunteer to feed the homeless and hungry, you join study groups to educate, you inform and prepare yourselves, you serve on leadership teams, councils and boards, you listen and pray with each other, you give your time and financial resources. We are showing up and burning the candle from both ends. But, our patience and endurance is wearing thin. Our hearts are heavy. So, we find ourselves snapping at our family, or maybe we're finding it hard to sleep and difficult to stay engaged with the issue of the day" or issues of these times". From this space we might be asking ourselves, "What's the use"? And from our despair, the God of Isaiah calls us to show up and reflect God's love that will, "reach to the end of earth." But, we are not feeling very light right now.

In this time of double pandemic we are facing a world-wide type of suffering that comes from the transitions of change. The fact that we don't get to know how long these transitions will last just adds to the collective anxiety. When I was in labor with my first child I remember saying to the nurse, or maybe my husband, or anyone in earshot, "Listen, just tell me how long I have to do this and I can do this." The nurse rolled her eyes, my husband panicked. I could just see him mentally running through all the lamaze class instructions for on how to comfort your wife when she becomes unreasonable. It was my Mom who said, "Don't fight it honey. It's hard, but you can do hard things". Today people are fighting against themselves and each other. No wonder we are wearing out! We need to find a way to endure and sustain each other in this hard

work. Because this work we're doing? This is not a walk in the park. It is a cross country, ultra marathon, endurance race across the Mojave desert. This is going to require pacing and a voice of hope.

We often talk of hope as wishful thinking: "I hope it doesn't rain"; "I hope I win the lottery"; "I hope we can change the world!" But as Hannah read to us, hope isn't about wishful thinking, it is about the absolute certainty of a future nurtured with God's love and promise. Paul says, "We can boast in our suffering because it leads to something better". Through a chain reaction, one circumstance sets off a whole sequence of other circumstances: suffering produces patience, and patience produces character, and character produces hope. And hope, Pauls says, hope does not disappoint. Suffering is the catalyst in this process. Suffering is unavoidable. There are things we learn about ourselves through suffering that we just don't learn any other way. Ask someone who has lost a spouse, labored to birth a child, or anyone living through a pandemic.

And Paul knew something of suffering, he wrote out of his own experience. In return for being a follower of Jesus, Paul was beaten and imprisoned. But what you don't know from these few verses is that Paul did not suffer alone. He had a community that visited him, brought him food, and lifted him up into the lap God in the midst of his suffering. Paul does not suffer alone. And neither do we. We show up together, we suffer together, and we find hope together. When I can't find my hope I'm counting on you to hold me in God's love. And I will do the same for you! We will wait in the suffering together until God's love is poured into our hearts. These heavy, heavy, precious hearts.

Black author and activist, James Baldwin wrote in the manuscript for his memoir, *Remember This House*, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." We are living in a very precarious time of history. We are being called to face hard things, at our lowest moments. And that might just be too much to bear - if this work was self-serving. But it's not. We are called by God, inspired by Jesus and enflamed by the Holy Spirit to stand up, speak out and keep going. Even when things gets tough.

In this cross-country, race of endurance we show up for God and we run together because it turns out this is a relay race. When you're too tired, I will hold on to hope for you. And I know you'll do the same for me.

Amen.