

A sermon “Hope that does not disappoint”
From Romans 5:1-5
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For the Apostle Paul, Abraham was a big deal. (And let’s be honest, Sarah too—though Paul, shaped by his patriarchal lens, might not have given her full due.) Paul devotes an entire chapter to Abraham in the lead-up to today’s reading, lifting him up as the model of faith—someone who trusted the promises of God.

But if you read their story closely, Abraham and Sarah’s faith wasn’t the unshakable rock Paul might seem to suggest.

When God first promised that Sarah—already old and barren—would have a child, they waited 25 years for that promise to be fulfilled. That’s a long time to keep hoping. A long time to keep trusting. And they didn’t always get it right.

Sometimes they doubted. Sometimes they got discouraged.

There’s that moment when Abraham, full of questions, is led outside by God to gaze at the night sky. “Count the stars if you can,” God says. “That’s how many descendants will come from Sarah’s womb.”

And there’s Sarah, so weary of waiting that she hatches a desperate plan: Have Abraham sleep with her servant, Hagar, in order to have a child. (And Abraham... well, Abraham goes along with it. What gives with that?)

Their story is full of detours and doubts. But God keeps nudging them forward.

Remember the story from a past Sunday School lesson? One hot afternoon, three strangers appear at Abraham and Sarah’s tent. They offer hospitality—water, shade, bread—and one of the guests promises that Sarah will soon bear a son. And Sarah? She laughs. Not out of cynicism, but something closer to joy—a fragile kind of hope being reborn.

So no, Paul’s great heroes of faith weren’t spiritual superheroes. They were human—fragile, fallible, and familiar. Not so different from you and me.

And with that, we turn to Paul’s words in Romans 5:

“Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ...”

Bear with me while I unpack two bits of seminary vocabulary—don’t worry, I promise they’re worth it.

First: “Justification.”

To be justified is to be made right with God. Paul says we are *justified by faith*—not by having perfect lives, but by trusting in God’s grace. Justification means we discover—often to our amazement—that God already loves us, even in our mess. Abraham and Sarah were justified, not because they got it all right, but because they opened themselves to God’s promise.

Second: “Sanctification.”

If justification is about beginning the relationship, sanctification is about how that relationship changes us over time. God doesn’t leave us stuck in our sin. God shapes us—slowly, patiently—into something more like Jesus.

And that brings us to Paul’s strange turn of phrase:

“We boast in our sufferings.”

Sounds almost masochistic, right? But that’s not what Paul means. He’s not glorifying pain for its own sake.

The truth is, **suffering finds all of us**. Behind every smiling face is a story of pain. “Be kind,” the saying goes, “for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.”

Sometimes our suffering comes simply from being human. Sometimes, it comes because we try to follow Jesus in a world that resists the ways of love.

And in that suffering, Paul sees an opportunity:

“Suffering produces endurance. Endurance produces character. Character produces hope. And hope does not disappoint us.”

It’s almost like a spiritual equation.

But not all hope is created equal. There’s a kind of shallow hope—what we might call *Pollyanna hope*—that says, “Things will get better any minute now!” But when things don’t get better—when the bend in the road leads to more pain—that kind of hope crashes.

Christian hope is different.

It’s rooted not in our circumstances, but in the unshakable goodness of God. It’s born in the hard places. It’s refined in fire.

Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is at hand.” That’s not naive optimism. He knew what awaited him in Jerusalem: rejection, suffering, death. But he also knew that on the other side of the cross, there is resurrection. That heaven is closer than we think. That sometimes, by God’s grace, it touches down—right here, in this world.

And we are called to make space for it to do so.

Right now, we are living through a time of heightened suffering. The costs of a pandemic that are still with us. A government that is withdrawing financial aid for so many services. A society fractured by division, violence, and systemic racism. And yet—it’s also a moment of opportunity.

A moment to rediscover the deeper hope.

A moment to let God work within us—to become more like Jesus.

Elsewhere Paul writes:

“There is neither Jew nor Greek,
slave nor free, male nor female,
for we are all one in Christ Jesus.”

In Christ, Paul glimpsed a world where all our divisions are healed. And yet, even Paul struggled to fully live that truth—especially in his acceptance of patriarchal norms.

The truth is, the lie of hierarchy—the lie that some lives matter more than others—still lives in all of us. And Jesus warned us: don’t obsess over the speck in your neighbor’s eye until you’ve looked at the log in your own.

In this moment, our nation is being challenged to confront one of its deepest lies: the one that divides Black and white. The Civil Rights movement—so rooted in the faith of the Black Church—understood something many of us still struggle to grasp:

That to endure long suffering, you need more than strategies. You need soul.

When white allies came south, eager to organize, they sometimes grew impatient with the long hours spent singing and praying.

But the Black Church knew: organizing wasn’t enough. They needed to touch heaven.

They needed to laugh like Sarah at the sheer impossibility of the promise.

They needed to sing “Free at last!” not because freedom had arrived, but to claim the hope that it would arrive.

They needed a hope that wouldn’t disappoint them.

And so do we.

We may not be where we want to be—not yet. But in this hard season, we have the opportunity to grow. To endure. To deepen our character. And to cling to a hope rooted in Christ—a hope that does not disappoint.

Amen.