

**Sermon May 22 2016 Holy Trinity C
Atonement Lutheran Church + Nancy Raabe, AiM**

Getting Hope

Over the past two weeks we have been pondering the many ways in which God is inviting us to new life and a new hope.

In the recent history of this congregation, hope has been in short supply. Perhaps during that time you've heard people say, "There is no hope for Atonement Lutheran Church." Our wonderful secretary, Pattye Gilmour, allowed me to share with you that last summer she began clearing photos and other personal items out of the office in anticipation that the doors were about to close.

But what, exactly, IS Christian hope? And if we're not sure, how can we say we don't have any?

This is Holy Trinity Sunday, the day of the church year on which we reflect on the inexplicable mystery of the triune God, one God in three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. All three of our hymns today will take us deeply into this mystery. The last stanza of our opening hymn, "Holy God, We Praise Your Name," is a good example: "Holy Father, Holy Son, Holy Spirit, three we name you, / though in essence only one; undivided God, we claim you / and, adoring, bend the knee while we own the mystery." We own it—we confess it. So it doesn't have to be explained.

But the Epistle reading assigned for today from Paul's letter to the Romans, Chapter 5, verse 2 1-5, really speaks to what hope is and how we come to have it.

What is hope? Sometimes we can better understand what things are by looking at what they are not. Last week there was a tragic story in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel that spoke of the utter absence of hope. It concerned a childless Milwaukee couple in their early 70s, Paul and Virginia, who purposely ended their lives in their van by carbon monoxide poisoning. Virginia's Alzheimer's had progressed to the point that she no longer recognized Paul, who for years had devoted himself solely to caring for her. The love of his life now had no idea who he was, and she complained to others, about Paul, that "strange men keep coming into my house." The pain became too great, so Paul planned their departure. He left a note on his desk: "I am sorry to leave like this, but...Virginia and I are terminating."

The news of their deaths deeply troubled the executive director of the Alzheimer's Association of Southern Wisconsin. "This," he said, "is what keeps us up at night." The despair Paul must have felt, he said, is not uncommon among caregivers. "It's heart-rending and terribly difficult. You need to get help. For the person you're caring for and for yourself, it can mean the difference between life and death. Get help. Fast."

Get help means get hope. But how do we "get hope?"

Let's look more at the Romans reading, especially verses 3 and 4: "And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope...."

How do suffering, endurance, and character lead us to hope?

At one time or another, each of us has probably experienced the feeling that God has abandoned us. Perhaps it was at times of crisis, such as the death of a spouse or a loved one, the loss of a job, a devastating health setback, or maybe even two or all three of these in close succession. If you read the Psalms, you may have come upon Psalm 88, considered to be the darkest lament of all. Addressed to God, it ends like this:

*My friend and neighbor you have put away from me,
and darkness is my only companion.*

The psalmist here is on the verge of what Paul in the newspaper story must have felt—the utter loss of all hope. But in the psalm there’s a hidden lifeline: The psalmist is *still talking to God*. This tells us he hasn’t given up completely. If he had, the psalm would never have been written.

So, how does suffering produce endurance? Acknowledging our suffering brings us closer to God, because pain strips away everything we normally use to protect ourselves. It’s at that point that we come to know that that God is our only refuge. “Lord, to whom shall we go?” Peter asks Jesus in John 6. “YOU have the words of eternal life.” Just like the psalmist, faith in God keeps us from falling over the edge. *This* is endurance. We suffered, but we grew in wisdom as we lived through it with Jesus at our side. Through this ordeal we become more aware than ever before of God’s love and compassion.

And how does endurance produce character? The more we realize how *much* God loves us, having brought us like Daniel through fiery ordeals, the more we are able to love ourselves, just as God does. As a result we need no longer withhold from the world the dynamic, unique person that God created us to be. *This* is character—knowing

the inner terrain of our soul and sharing that. So if you hear someone say about you, “She is such a character,” always take that as a compliment!

And *this* is how character produces hope. We recognize ourselves as persons beloved by God, to whom God has given special gifts and abilities to proclaim the good news of salvation—our deliverance by Jesus Christ from sin, death and the devil. Our deepened faith restores in us the confidence that God’s promises are true—not that they will come true, but that they are true. So hope is not about something in the future; it’s a condition of the present, of this very moment.

And this leads us to the last verse of the Romans reading: “...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 is good news for God’s people. Amen.