

A Sermon for Robbinsdale United Church of Christ
February 24, 2008 – 3rd Sunday in Lent
Rev. T. Michael Rock

Scripture Readings – Exodus 17:1-7 and Romans 5:1-11

Sermon Title: “Suffering, Endurance, Character, Hope”

(open with prayer)

Introduction:

I once had a Confirmation student who responded to the questions of confirmation a resounding, “No.” Do you consider yourself a Christian? Do you desire to be a member of this local church? She stood in the pulpit on the day of Confirmation after listening to her eight other classmates talk about their faith and desire, she stood there in her strongest 14 year-old voice and said “No.” As is my role in the process, we had sat together at her kitchen table a week earlier and I supported her answer, but we talked for a couple of hours about ‘why’ she was saying, “No.” On that Sunday morning she looked out at her parents and older brother, who was a leader in the youth group at the time. She looked out at her grandparents and her Confirmation. She looked out at the beauty of the space, and the angel voices in the choir and said simply, “You are the reason I have to say no. This community, my family, my brother all of you have showered me with your love and protection every day of my 14 years. I live in a nice house, I have great clothes, I have a great education, and every opportunity I could possibly want has been given to me. **In my short lifetime, I have never known suffering.** When I read the Bible and listen to T. Michael and my classmates tell about how God can be with you in times of suffering, I can’t relate to that. No one close to me has died, and our last family vacation was to the Bahamas. How can I call myself a Christian when I don’t even know what it means to be in need? I have to say no to these questions at this time, because I do not have the knowledge and wisdom yet to understand the grace of God. I’m sure that someday, I’ll be there, and that my life will teach me new lessons. Someday, I’ll understand the faith of my parents, my brother, and this church, and I may even accept as my own, but right now all I can say is, thank you for your love, your patience, and your presence in my life.”

This is one of my favorite Confirmation speeches of all time. This young woman who has gone on to do some amazing things, including spending an entire high school semester living in New York City and serving in soup kitchens, she also touched a deep and profound truth in many hearts on that day. She reminded us all the deep importance of our suffering as it relates to our faith. She reminded us that it is in our

vulnerability that we come to know God. Living a life of safety and separateness can place a barrier to our understanding of God and God's grace. Today, we are challenged to look at our suffering, examine our suffering and discern together where we have come from in our suffering, and perhaps, what lies ahead.

John Dominic Crossan, radical biblical scholar talks about the early Christian lens of, "what has your God done for me lately?" He says that in the first century, the Apostle Paul could not argue the uniqueness of the Virgin Birth or the Resurrection. Both stories were common in religious language. Even the Romans coins had the inscription under Ceasar's picture, "Son of God." Paul's message had nothing to do with either Christmas or Easter. What made Paul's message unique and a threat to the Roman establishment was a message of suffering and humility. In Paul's world, God was the judge that reckoned life at its end. God judged and punished because God saw sin rather than righteousness. Our souls literally went to trial with only one side of the story. We had no lawyer to advocate on our behalf. Our eternity was hopeless in this system of judgment and retribution. What Jesus does, according to Paul, is suffer and die for us. Jesus jumps in front of the bus of God's wrath and judgment in order to save us. This savior is not like any other. This savior puts into perspective our suffering, not as an end and defining attribute of our lives, but as the beginning of our understanding of grace. Jesus jumps in front of the bus and gives us a second chance to look at our lives. According to Paul, Jesus dies for us, so that we have the time and space to look again at our suffering.

What happens in Paul's theology is that Jesus gives all people the thing that is sure to transform our lives, Jesus gives all of us a 'near death experience'. By this second chance we are then able to understand our lives as enriched by suffering. We have endured, we are no longer identified by suffering. With this near death experience under our belt, life takes on a different sort of meaning and depth. We now have a story to tell. This experience has given us character. Look back on this year of people sharing their 'witness'. Remember the power of all of these collective experiences of suffering, enduring, and character. What a common and wonderful way to understand our life and begin to understand grace. Our suffering leads to something else. This is the new perspective Paul gives to the world. Paul helps us understand the origins of hope. Hope is what matters for Paul. Hope is what we are told is purpose of suffering. Hope lives in the darkest places of loneliness and despair. Hope lives in the deepest moments of pain and loss. Hope lives because each time we see the headlights bearing down on us, Jesus jumps in front of the bus and lets us live. Last week, Dwight took on the daunting task of unpacking "born again" language. This weeks task is to look at what it means to be "saved."

I believe that this is less complex. Being saved is this understanding that we are not alone to face the judgment of God. We are saved from suffering. We are saved from despair, loss, grief, and loneliness by the mere existence of hope. When my conservative cousin asks if I am saved, I can say with confidence that of course I'm saved. I get Paul's theology of Jesus. I know that Jesus' message is also more complex than this, but I get that in the first century when street preachers were competing for the attention of the people. This message worked. It was the cornerstone of the Christian church. What we have to remember is that the story of Jesus dying for us moves directly to what we do with this second chance. As soon as we get to hope, the Holy Spirit fills us with love, and we are called to share that with others. It is the ultimate grass roots movement.

The best illustration of this comes from the book of Exodus. The people are suffering, they are in the desert and they are thirsty, by the way, a great metaphor for suffering. In the midst of their complaining, Moses advocates for them to God. Moses saves them, comes between their suffering and God's judgment and gives them an opportunity to move from their suffering all the way to hope. The experience becomes a character defining experience for the people, and they are given hope in God who gives water and life. Then they are called to share it. Remember water gives life.

Remember on this third Sunday in Lent that we are on a journey, a journey that looks inward at our own suffering and gives us a sense of hope, renewal, and healing for our broken lives. May we all be saved.

AMEN.