

**THE TRAJECTORY OF HOPE**  
Exodus 19:2-8a, Romans 5:1-8 6/14/20

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The Greek novelist, *Nikos Kazantzakis*, came upon a cocoon as a butterfly  
struggled to emerge

After watching for a few minutes, Kazantzakis tried to hasten the butterfly's  
escape by  
gently blowing upon the cocoon

--sure enough, the warmth of his breath sped up the miracle of  
transformation unfolding  
before him

But when the butterfly emerged from the cocoon, its wings were folded back  
and badly crumpled

The butterfly fought to unfold the fragile wings, but was soon exhausted,  
shriveled up,  
and died

--as *Kazantzakis* later observed, by sparing the butterfly the ordeal of  
struggle, he  
kept it from developing the strength needed to survive

In Romans, chapter 5, Paul teaches much the same lesson:

"Suffering produces *endurance*," he writes, "and endurance produces  
*character*, and  
character produces *hope*" (Rom. 5:3-4)

--have you not found it so in your own experience?

Trying times often prove to be seasons of growth and self-discovery . . .

--and times of deepening our faith and trust in God

Still, when are in the *midst* of a crisis, it's hard to remember that life lesson

Instead, we are eager to fast forward through the hard parts and get on with  
whatever  
is coming next

Some of us, for example, are ready for the turmoil surrounding the brutal slaying  
of  
George Floyd to be over

"How much longer will these protests dominate the news?," we wonder  
--how much longer will our Facebook pages light up with testy exchanges  
and divisive rhetoric?

How much longer will we be asked to confront and atone for a long,  
tortured,  
400-year old chapter in our nation's history?

--can't we just "kiss and make up" -- like children settling a spat in the  
sandbox --  
and move on?

No we can't . . . *Not* if we believe the Bible

Because the Bible teaches that real, enduring change comes not from a  
heady optimism  
that holds things tend to work out

--No, the biblical hope for change is found in embracing our suffering -- and  
the  
suffering of the world -- and learning what it has to teach us

As the Apostle teaches in Romans, first comes *suffering*, *then* endurance  
*then*  
character -- and only *then* -- *Hope!*

During one of the many peaceful protests in our city, a young man from our  
church was present

A protest leader saw his white face in a sea of mostly black and brown ones  
and  
called him up to the podium

--in a brief interview, the young man confessed that this was his first Black Lives matter protest

So why was he there?

--*Because*, our young Knollwoodian answered, "When I was growing up, I did not know how much privilege I had just by being white"

"But these last few years, whenever you see (injustice) happen, at some point I said, 'If I was black I would not want this to happen to me. I can't stand for this. We have to do something about it'"

I thought about going to one of those marches myself

Not because I have anything to offer but because I have so much to learn

--in the end, Bambi vetoed the idea over concerns about COVID-19 transmission

But I'm proud of the Knollwoodians who *did* show up to learn what those protestors are trying to teach us -- while adding their voices to the rising chorus, *swelling throughout the land*, demanding change

Yes, there's been some over-reaching

Vilifying the police and cancelling every cop show on television is not the answer

--the problem is *not* most police *officers* but the police *tactics* that emphasize using *as much force* as possible instead of *as little force as possible* to restrain violence and restore order

The problem is a culture that stereotypes and devalues black lives so it is acceptable to send four officers to apprehend a black man accused of passing a forged 20 dollar bill

But despite some instances of over-heated rhetoric and violence, the fact remains: our nation is being forced to confront a long, tortured history of racial prejudice and injustice

And again, if the Bible is to be believed, this is something God is passionate about

--our Old Testament lesson this morning recalls the Exodus in which God bore an oppressed people out of Egypt "on eagle's wings" (Ex. 19:4)

And that liberation began, the Good Book tells us, when God *heard* the cries of God's people and was moved by their suffering ( Ex. 3;7, 9)

In his book on the pastoral life, *The Wounded Healer*, Henri Nouwen writes,

"Who can save a child from a burning house without taking the risk of being hurt by the flames? Who can listen to a story of loneliness and despair without taking the risk of experiencing similar pains in his own heart and even losing his precious peace of mind?"

"In short: *Who can take away suffering without entering it?*"

This is what God did at the cross

As Paul writes, "But God proves the divine love for us in that *while we were yet sinners* Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8)

--at the cross of Jesus, God enters so fully into the world's sin and suffering that the stranglehold of sin and death is broken

Thus, the cross and resurrection of Jesus becomes the ultimate ground of our hope

--because God's shocking, scandalous salvation of the world through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection shows how our Heavenly Abba can take even the most vile and most sinister of evils and turn them toward good (Rom 8:28)

Dare we hope that is happening even now, as our nation convulses toward  
some kind  
of new beginning?

Might the anguish being vented by God's children of African Ancestry among  
us --  
and the moral awakening of people of conscience -- be part of God's  
plan to  
restore both peace and justice to our broken world?

Some are suggesting -- and I hope they are right - that the revulsion and turmoil  
gripping  
our nation in the wake of the tragic death of George Floyd is our  
generation's  
Emmett Till moment

In 1955, Emmett Till -- a 14-year-old black boy -- was accused of flirting with  
a white woman

--as a result, he was brutally beaten, shot in the head, wrapped in barbed  
wire, and  
his body dumped in the Tallahatchie River

The fate of Emmett Till forced a horrified nation to confront the brutal, ugly  
face of racism

--three months later, Rosa Parks' refused to give up her seat on a bus  
because --  
she later recalled -- "I thought of Emmett Till and I couldn't go to the  
back of the bus"

Within a decade, the Civil Rights Act -- and then the Voting Rights Act --  
were passed  
that outlawed many forms of racial discrimination and intimidation

Even so, while part of me -- my privileged, safe, longing to get back-to-business  
as usual self --  
wants to move on -- the Christ-yearning-to-be-born anew in me self is  
demanding  
that I open my eyes and heart and will to this poignant moment in our  
nation's history

And it's not just me!

--the NFL is now allowing players to take the knee, NASCAR is banning  
confederate flags  
as a way of showing their sport truly welcoming to all, and long-needed  
police reforms  
are gathering bipartisan momentum in Congress

Surely, this is a miracle of biblical proportions

--and it suggests the God who declared to Pharaoh, long ago, "Let my  
people go,"  
is no less interested today than then in setting an oppressed people  
free

Yes, according to Paul, from suffering comes endurance

And from endurance comes the kind of *character* that brings real and lasting  
change

--and from character, comes hope -- earnest, serious, reality-based hope

"And *this kind of hope* does not disappoint," the Apostle exults, "as God's  
love is  
poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 5:5)

My grandsons, James age 8 and Andrew age 5, have been staying with Mimi  
and Papa --  
Bambi and me -- the last couple of weeks

And I've noticed: whenever I take them on a trip in the car, they are soon  
asking the  
question I used to ask of *my dad* from the back seat of a 1960s Rambler  
station wagon  
--"Daddy, are we there yet? Are we *there* yet?"

No, dear brothers and sisters, we are not there yet

But the journey toward racial justice and reconciliation continues

--and I hope and pray that Knollwood will be willing -- in the words of one of  
our members --  
to experience a "*season of discomfort*"

For only as we learn what the suffering of our African-American neighbors is  
trying to  
teach us can we become part of the change our just, liberating God is  
striving,  
even now, to unleash in the world

\* \* \* \* \*

*O God of Exodus and Resurrection, awaken us to your cries of anguish  
over the  
injustice and suffering in our world.*

*Then lead us to follow Jesus in the way of risky, liberating love.*

*In his name we pray, and hope to live. Amen.*

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