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

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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’s 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.

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.

--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.

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!
--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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