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***Hold onto the Hope!***  
***Romans 5:1-8***

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

2 through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

3 And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,

4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,

5 and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Lectio Divina—word/phrase, picture/memory,  
 What did you hear God saying to you in this passage?  
 Prayer

When I hear this wonderful passage,  
 I just keep hearing, over and over, '***hold onto the hope!***'

Wow—that's really hard right now, isn't it?  
 You know, we are all struggling---  
 with the social isolation from the corona virus and our stay at home orders,  
 from the loss of jobs, from moving our jobs to our homes,  
 from kids being at home all the time, and family stresses compounded.  
 And then, there are the struggles that don't even have to do with COVID-19,  
 like caring for sick loved ones, or fighting cancer, having a heart attack,  
 or dealing with physical or emotional pain and trauma...  
 My precious father died this week, and we couldn't have a memorial for him...  
 We are ALL struggling right now--  
 So many of us, are just trying to ***hold onto hope!***

These words come right after Paul describes God's ***grace***.  
 How our salvation is a gift from God,  
 not something we have earned.  
 And how that grace has brought us ***peace***.

And given us a certain *perspective about suffering*.  
 A perspective that comes from the *cross of Christ*.  
***Because of Jesus, we can find hope—even in our suffering!***

When Paul says we should boast, do you know what that word really means?  
 it means *rejoice*.

Why would we *rejoice* in our sufferings?

Paul says, “We *rejoice* in our suffering  
*because suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character, and  
 character produces hope.....*”

Now, that can sound kind of like one of those irritating *slogan posters* on the  
 wall of a gym,

You know, like--No pain, no gain.

But what if this is *not a PRE-scriptio*n for our lives?

Something we’re supposed to just go out and do...

What if this is a *DE-scriptio*n of life with Jesus Christ?

We do after all, have a Savior who *died on a cross* to redeem our lives and all  
 creation....so maybe suffering can have meaning.

And hope.

What if we are supposed to *hold onto THAT hope*?

What if God can bring goodness from suffering?

Like more *endurance*, stronger *character*, and *hope*?

What if Paul is basically saying—*hold onto to the hope*.

Even in the middle of pain.

I believe this is such a powerful message—

because we are all facing such pain in this life right now with the global  
 pandemic. COVID-19 has upended our lives, right?

the question is *how do we find some meaning* in it?

How do we decide where to *focus*?

Will we focus just on the *pain*?

Or look for the *hope*?

And what if we don't have to force ourselves to find hope?

What if it's something that we **allow God to show us?**

By **surrendering** our lives to God?

What if surrendering helps to get us beyond avoidance, and denial, and self-pity, and right on through the storms of life?

Pastor Linda Thomas puts it this way, "*...the suffering of life helps us grow stronger and build our character and patience..... but we can do this only if we have an abiding sense of the **reality of God** ...then a marvelous thing happens: ... Even in a storm we know all is well, because we are convinced of the **utter love of God.***" (Linda Thomas, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3, pg. 42).

What if the **love of God**—revealed in the **cross** of Christ—is the **very thing that brings us hope?**

As a Pastor, I am humbled and honored to hear **people's stories**, their suffering, and how they've dealt with it.

I find that it can go **one of two ways**:

either people become very **hard and cynical** after suffering,

OR they gain new empathy, and compassion,

and just as Paul says here in Romans,

they gain **more endurance, greater character, and real hope!**

I **don't believe** that

going through a trial **automatically** brings about character and hope,

but I **do believe** that you don't find real character and hope

without walking through the pain of life!

**I wonder whether** we can really learn, and grow, and be people of hope without suffering?

Not that pain is good, just that it can **serve a purpose**.

It can **strengthen us, deepen us, make us more faithful**.

Pain is inevitable, the question is what we do with it!

I smiled when I read how author **Brene Brown** came back to church after many years away. She remembers thinking that church should act like a pain reliever, like an epidural in labor. Instead she discovered that church, and faith "*was more like a midwife who just stood next to me and said, "Push! It's supposed to hurt."*

["Brené Brown on Church as Midwife,"](#) In the Meantime (4-11-14)

Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, once spoke about a Jewish phenomena that applies to Christians as well. "**When it was hard to be a Jew**," Sacks wrote, "people **stayed** Jewish. When it was **easy** to be a Jew, people **stopped** being Jewish...." Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Future Tense: Jews, Judaism, and Israel in the Twenty-first Century* (Schocken Books, 2009), page 51

We all **WANT to avoid** pain, but we can't, can we?

We are all in some kind of pain right now—because we are all in this crazy time together.

The question is whether in the pain, we **can hold onto the hope!**

Haven't you noticed that if you make a **snap judgment** about someone, whose life seems rather perfect and easy, you usually discover a hidden pain inside?

Because we **usually can't tell** what someone is facing by the way they look on the outside, right?

Unless they are prone to complain, they may look like they have it all together.

They may say "I'm just fine".

It's up to us to listen for the **real story**.

I believe that through suffering our lives **CAN BE changed**,

Our lives can be shaped by the trials we face.

And we can, by the grace of God, find **endurance, and character, and hope**—right in the middle of our pain.

When Paul talks about **character** in suffering, he's referring to a Greek word that means tried through affliction, or experience.

It comes from the image of a **refiner's fire**.

Think about that.

Being **changed by fire**.

That sounds fitting, doesn't it?

Sometimes it sure does feel like a fire, doesn't it?

Pastor Michael Jenkins reminds us that God can use our suffering for good— He says, “*God does not reserve our spiritual transformation to the afterworld, but delivers it with the morning paper to our front door. We are washed, cleansed, in water and **fire**, and we **drip the holy stuff** wherever we go. We track it into every room of our lives and out into the world.*” (Michael Jenkins, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 3, pg. 42*).

What if we **do drip holy stuff**?

(Boy, isn't that better than thinking about COVID-19 germs everywhere??)

The stuff that God teaches us through the fire?

What if in the fires of life, we can find **hope**?

And as Paul says, “*hope does not disappoint us because the love of God is poured into our hearts through the power of the Holy Spirit.*”

Does this mean that suffering itself is good?

I **don't think** that's what God is saying.

In **Romans 8:28**, Paul says, “for we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose”

It doesn't say that all things **are** good,

It says that **God can bring good** out of all things.

Even the worst suffering.

God **does NOT call suffering itself good**.

Instead, **God suffers with us**.

Just like **Christ** on the cross suffers for us.

In **Isaiah 43** God says:

Do not fear....<sup>2</sup> When you pass through the waters, **I will be with you**; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. <sup>3</sup> For I am the Lord your God, ...

Do not fear, **for I am with you**; ...

No, our God does not call suffering good.

**Our God is so good, that He walks with us through our suffering!**

**Dr. Jamie Aten**, a cancer survivor and researcher, studies trauma, and how people find meaning in it.

He says that most of us operate from ... a "just" worldview: if we are good, good things will happen.

So it's hard to find meaning when bad things happen to us.

He says, "I remember that a colleague of mine helping after Superstorm Sandy met a man whose **roof had been blown away**.

This man surprised the relief team by saying:

**"Sometimes you have to lose the roof," he said, "to see the stars."**

That's a man who knows how to **find meaning** in loss.

Aten's research team has interviewed and surveyed **disaster survivors** about their views of God. **Two people** who go through the same loss can believe different things. One believes God saved them, while the other believes God is punishing them. They found that the person who doesn't find positive meaning is likely to struggle much more. Aten writes,

**"I encourage you: Even in the worst moments, look for the stars."**

Dr. Jamie Aten, "Spiritual Advice for surviving cancer and other disasters," The Washington Post (8-9-16)

Isn't that about right?

**Sometimes you have to lose the roof, to see the stars!**

Sometimes **hope only comes through the pain!**

You know, sometimes we expect God to be like our Santa,

Or our genie in a bottle,

Just giving us what we want....

What if when we **stop expecting God to be Santa**, or a genie in a bottle, what if **that's when we really learn to hold onto hope?**

I have always been inspired by the story of Jerry Sittser.

After a **drunk driver** smashed into his minivan, Sittser and three of his children survived, but Sittser's wife, four-year-old child, and mother died in the crash. Over the years Sittser has offered some profound reflections about loss, grief, and suffering. In his book *A Grace Revealed*, Sittser shares the a story about his son David, where they talking in the car.

**"Do you think Mom sees us right now?"** he suddenly asked.

I paused to ponder. "I don't know, David. I think maybe she does see us. Why do you ask?"

"I don't see how she could, Dad. I thought Heaven was full of happiness. **How could she bear to see us so sad?**"

"I think she does see us," I finally said. "But she sees the **whole story**, including how it all turns out, which is beautiful to her. It's going to be a **good story**, David."

Sittser adds: ..."The Christian answer to suffering is **Christ's** suffering and Christ's resurrection ....

God knows **pain** within himself; God knows **joy** within himself. He knows the **whole story** as one, including how it all **turns out**, which is glorious indeed. Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Revealed* (Zondervan, 2012), pp. 138-139

Talk about **holding onto hope!**

We have that **same hope**—that our Savior Jesus knows our pain,  
And He knows how it's all going to turn out!

That's **why we can hold onto hope!**

Just like we can see **stars** on the darkest nights,  
it is possible to find hope even amidst suffering....  
Because of God's amazing grace,  
and **God's power** to bring forth light even in the darkness.

And you know what?

That's our **Good News of the gospel** today.

May we all **hold onto the hope**. Amen.