

Hope Does Not Disappoint
Romans 5.1-5
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First & Central Presbyterian Church
Wilmington, Delaware
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I've started it three times –each with sound intentions and plenty of motivation – and each time, I ran out of gas after a few hundred pages.

Taylor Branch's massive trilogy about America in the time of Martin Luther King, Jr., which spans the years between 1954 and 1968, begins with his book, *Parting the Waters*. It's a "must read" for anyone digging deeply into the roots of this country's ongoing struggle with human and civil rights. Taylor Branch appears to miss not the smallest of details and delves into the events and timeline of the era, along with the politics, cultural idiosyncrasies, and the "behind the scenes" conflicts among the movement's most prominent and powerful figures. It is a compendium of information and intrigue and is lauded as the first and final word about King's life and times.

Yet, despite all of the above, coupled with my passions for social justice and provocative writing, I bog down before I'm a third into the book, and according to the "rule of 50," I have permission to abandon the quest.

The "Rule of 50" simply states that one only needs to read the first 50 pages of a book before deciding not to finish. The premise is that if the author doesn't grab attention in that first chapter or two, we shouldn't feel any obligation to read further. There's a caveat to the rule, however, for folks who are older than fifty – and that is to deduct one's age from 100 – and that's how many pages one needs to read before giving up on the book. It's a slight "tip of the hat" to the fact that time might be a more precious commodity as we age.

Now if someone were to apply the "rule of 50" to the Bible, you'd end up somewhere at the end of Genesis or the beginning of Exodus and might feel like you'd had enough.

For the book that is reputed to be the best-selling volume of all time, I hear often from people who struggle to read all or even most of it.

When people ask me about how to read the Bible, I sometimes suggest that they start with the New Testament. It's a far more familiar part of our religious world and by reading just 3 books; one can have a fairly solid grasp of the story and most prominent theology. So...want a little summer reading project? Grab a Bible – either an NRSV or a copy of Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, and read the books of Luke, Acts, and Romans. Luke and Acts were written by the same gifted storyteller, so there's consistency of style and theology and how Jesus is portrayed. Romans is Paul's great *magnum opus* in which he systematically presents his understanding of Jesus (which is quite different from Luke) and also goes deeply into his theology.

To fully understand Paul's writing, we first have to have even a cursory glimpse of the circumstances and context of the letter to the church in Rome.

Many of you have had to write short bios about yourselves – almost everyone here has been asked to do that when you joined the church. Anyone who has applied to college knows the importance of the dreaded “essays”, and if we've applied for membership into any number of professional, civic, service, or social organizations or clubs, we've plodded through applications requesting all sorts of personal information, background, and even anecdotal information.

Paul's task in Romans was that and then some.

Of all the letters of Paul, Romans is the longest and, as mentioned, is the most systematic unfolding of the apostle's thought. It was written toward the end of his ministry and it's somewhat reflective of what he's learned of faith, hope, and love – especially in light of his own frequently dire circumstances and suffering.

Paul wrote when he was about to leave for Jerusalem with a collection of funds for the impoverished Jewish Christian believers there, taken up from his predominantly Gentile congregations. He planned then to travel on to Rome and to enlist support there for a mission to Spain. With much accomplished in the East, he sought out new opportunities in the West, in order to complete the plan of evangelization the Roman world.

Paul writes ahead of his trip to introduce himself and his message to the Christians at Rome, seeking to enlist their support for the proposed mission to Spain. It's a dicey proposition as the pathetic little church in Rome had been under significant oppression and even persecution. Paul's not writing to a thriving bunch of folks and additionally he's planning to hit them up for money – not the greatest of circumstances to launch a capital campaign – and we thought our economic circumstances were tough!

Times may be tough – in our economy, in our employment, in our housing market, and, to a lesser degree, in our future prospects. We've been hunkered down for a few years now and chances are these reduced levels of income and spending will become the new norm. As the monetary markets continue to correct, we'll find ourselves with fewer and fewer financial options and will simply do without or with less. Yet despite all of the turmoil, frustration, and even misery – I doubt any here have chalked up the current situation to God's unmitigated displeasure with us – personally or with our country. We generally view life as a cyclical event—with ups and downs, pain and pleasure, joys and concerns, and clearly some of the dips are steep and frightening and some of the climbs arduous and at times void of hope and progress, yet it's a part of our humanity and certainly not due to God's disapproval of our lives.

That's a very different worldview than Paul was addressing.

The congregation in Rome was faced with oppression by the Roman government outside of their walls, and with some concern about the inclusion of Gentiles within. At that time,

and in congregations today – diversity was threatening. Not so much socio-economic diversity – but theological diversity. Paul’s writings are the earliest of the New Testament and the church was literally hundreds of years away from codifying its core beliefs hence without a “Book of Confessions,” what it meant to be a “Christian,” a “little Christ,” was up for grabs and subject to interpretation.

The book of Romans eventually became “scripture” because it provided the best framework of its day for defining this fledgling faith. Every significant Christian theologian since has written about and wrestled with Paul’s letter to the church in Rome.

For us, it may be confusing, a tad obtuse, even aggravating and maddening in the ways it’s been used as a divisive weapon in the church – but for that recipient congregation in Rome, it was a source of great comfort.

Their world view was that if things were not going well – God must be displeased. That’s one thing to handle internally, but it’s a massive source of embarrassment and shame when the outside world knows that there’s “trouble in River City.”

When we add names to the prayer list or we voice our concerns in the midst of the service, we do so out of love and compassion – not so that folks can be publicly shamed for their affliction or ailment. Yet, in a culture not too far removed from Job, a difficult life meant that you were not on God’s “A-list.” Paul’s premise in chapter 5 is to declare that way of thinking to be hogwash.

He starts with a one sentence re-statement of his central thesis: By entering through faith into what God has always wanted to do for us—set us right with God, make us fit for God—we have it all together with God because of Jesus. Put slightly differently – we don’t earn our way into God’s love – we simply have through our life in Christ.

To the Roman Christians this meant that God did indeed care for them, loved them, and was not displeased with them despite the fact that life was hard.

Paul pushes his point: There’s more to come: We continue to shout our praise even when we’re hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next.

Affliction in the Roman church was not the result of divine displeasure and should not have caused the Romans shame; rather, the church was awash in God’s gifts and despite their difficulties, the congregation was filled divine favor and love. Given that – they should not hide in humiliation and dishonor but instead should proclaim that God is active in their lives and community. They are struggling only because they are striving to be faithful. In our vernacular, they have chosen the high road and it’s not easy.

Really...without minimizing or glossing over our difficult days – many suffer because they refuse to go along to get along. I read enough of *Parting the Waters* to know that as

a central premise to King's life. We, as Americans, know that we have endured great sacrifice because we chose to do the right thing, to engage our soldiers in wars not on our turf, and to mourn their deaths on foreign soil because we could not ignore injustice and keep faith with our founding principles.

We today boast in our sufferings by proclaiming a national holiday that marks the death and sacrifice of our fallen – not counting it as shame, but as a badge of honor and faithfulness to a higher call because we know that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint.

This is not some Pollyanna prescription for finding “hope” as the silver-lining to suffering on a grand scale – but it is descriptive of a truth that was the reality of Paul's life and ministry, of Martin Luther King's quest for justice and freedom, and when we are at our best, of the central thread of the fiber of our country. Hope simple says, “yes we can” – not as a successful political slogan but as a statement of our response to a cause and call to a God who gives life with all facets in abundance – including joy and happiness and suffering and pain.

Downturns in our lives are a given. Paul knew that fact all too well. Pain is a given; what we do with it was the question. Paul's message to us? “Don't waste the pain. Don't squander the suffering.”

We waste pain when we gloss over or deny. We squander suffering when we avoid, or neglect its message. If, however, we can learn, we can delve deep, we part the waters of our ignorance, our pain is not wasted and rather becomes an inspired source of life and health.

On Memorial Day weekend we don't gather in shame of our losses, and we don't gather to deny the cost – we gather to remember and to learn and to proclaim with loud shouts and “amen's” that we have suffered, we have endured, and we, not because of a misguided arrogance of nationalism and patriotism, but we, as a people of God, humbled by the Spirit and saved by Jesus Christ, we can proclaim hope – and it is a hope that does not disappoint.

Amen.