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Hope

Psalm 10:1-4, 7-8, 12-18

*Why, O Lord, do you stand far off?
Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?
In arrogance the wicked persecute the poor—
Let them be caught in the schemes they have devised.*

*For the wicked boast of the desires of their heart,
Those greedy for gain curse and renounce the Lord.
In the pride of their countenance the wicked say, “God will not seek it out”;
All their thoughts are, “There is no God.”*

*Their mouths are filled with cursing and deceit and oppression;
Under their tongues are mischief and iniquity.
They sit in ambush in the villages;
In hiding places they murder the innocent.*

*Rise up, O Lord; O God, lift up your hand;
Do not forget the oppressed.
Why do the wicked renounce God,
And say in their hearts, “You will not call us to account”?*

*But you do see! Indeed you note trouble and grief,
That you may take it into your hands;
The helpless commit themselves to you;
You have been the helper of the orphan.*

*Break the arm of the wicked and evildoers;
Seek out their wickedness until you find none.
The Lord is king forever and ever;
The nations shall perish from his land.*

*O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek;
You will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear
To do justice for the orphan and the oppressed,
So that those from earth may strike terror no more.*

Romans 8:18-25

I believe that the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us. The whole creation waits breathless with anticipation for the revelation of God's sons and daughters. Creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice—it was the choice of the one who subjected it—but in the hope that the creation itself will be set free from slavery to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of God's children. We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labour pains up until now. And it's not only the creation. We ourselves who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest also groan inside as we wait to be adopted and for our bodies to be set free. We were saved in hope. If we see what we hope for, that isn't hope. Who hopes for what they already see? But if we hope for what we don't see, we wait for it with patience.

In the years before she died, my grannie used to say to me that she was glad she didn't have to try to fix the problems of the world—that she didn't know what was going to happen, but she was rather glad to be on her way out. And she died in 2014, so she didn't even know what was coming.

Now, fair enough. After a childhood during the Great Depression and a young adulthood in which her friends went to war, after living through the Cold War and the struggle for women's rights, I can see that an octogenarian might not quite have the energy to deal with climate change. Or systemic racism. Or a host of other issues that crop up on the nighttime news.

But thinking back on my grandmother's words, I feel both angry and sad. I feel angry because I think my grandmother's words point to a myth that we all believe: the idea that we can fix everything. And I feel sad for my grandmother and for us, because of how overwhelmed we can feel, how hopeless, how despairing, because it just seems like there are too many problems, the problems are too big and too complicated, we have no idea where to start, and it doesn't feel like anything will make a difference anyhow.

And for many there's a frustrated bewilderment: didn't we march for this already? Whatever the issue is, didn't we protest this? Didn't we work to fix this? Didn't we dream of a day when [insert issue here] would be gone? How are we back here?

Or – didn't my parents fight for this? Didn't my grandparents fight for this? Didn't previous generations sacrifice their futures, their dreams, their daughters and sons, their sweethearts and friends and siblings, their own *lives* so that the world could be safe and just and peaceful? Have we forgotten so quickly?

All of that is real. And that's why I give thanks to God for the psalms. They *name* all this. Psalm 10 names so many of our worries and fears today; names realities of today. Thousands of years after this psalm was written, the rich *still* exploit the poor. The powerful *still* are greedy. There is *still* suffering and injustice in the world.

The psalmist does not pretend it isn't so. Instead, he cries out to God: "Rise up, O Lord; O God, lift up your hand. Do not forget the oppressed." Do you see how the psalmist is instructing God here? Do you hear how the psalmist is demanding action from God? There is nothing meek about this prayer: "Break the arm of the wicked and evildoers; Seek out their wickedness until you find none."

"Show up, God! Do something!" It's a cry from the heart. We can pray like this too, friends. We too can yell at God. There is no need to apologize to God for taking up her time.

But according to the Apostle Paul, who wrote the letter to the Romans, "...the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us."

Really, Paul? Really? You sure about this one? Have you *seen* our present suffering?

Well yes, he had.

Paul lived under the Roman empire, which was the imperial power of its day, conquering its neighbours in the name of peace; imposing rulers and calling it civilization; suppressing protests and calling it justice. Rome was a propaganda machine, churning out stories of liberty, peace, justice, good governance; believing itself to be superior to all surrounding cultures. Paul lived in a time when the general population was lucky to live to be thirty years old, when indentured peasants had to sell their children into slavery to pay their debts, when criminals were executed in public, gory, humiliating ways.

So Paul isn't saying that suffering doesn't matter. Paul isn't saying that we should passively accept suffering. Paul is saying that the existence of suffering cannot kill hope.

Here's the thing, friends: we cannot wait for the world to give us either evidence or permission to hope. We have to *be* hope. Hope comes from taking action, not the other way around. We can't wait until there's reason to hope before getting involved. As my emphatically non-religious, non-spiritual, very wise sister told me: if we rely on external factors to give us reason for hope, then we will easily fall into despair. There has *never* been a time without suffering, injustice, or oppression.

And to illustrate this point, I want to look back to March 7, 1965, in Selma Alabama: Bloody Sunday, as it is now called. This was a protest march to highlight the gross inequality of the voting registration system, and how disenfranchised the local black population was. According to the website history.com, "African Americans made up more than half of the population, yet accounted for just 2 percent of registered voters."(<https://www.history.com/news/selma-bloody-sunday-attack-civil-rights-movement>)

Lynda Lowery, who was 14 that day, said that as she and others left their church service, they were singing "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around." And this is no light thing: there were plenty of reasons to turn around. After leaving the town of Selma and crossing the Edmund

Pettus bridge, the marchers were met by a crowd of Alabama State Troopers who ordered them to turn around. They stood their ground, and soon the troopers rushed the marchers, beating them with clubs, whips, and rubber tubing wrapped in barbed wire. John Lewis got clubbed in the head by a state trooper and thought he was going to die that day. He was 25.

It's easier to turn around than to keep going. There are going to be many obstacles. But we can't afford to let them stop us. Because God's world need healing, and God's people need loving, and we need hope. So we have to keep going.

And here's a crucial piece, friends: we have to accept that we might not see results in our lifetimes. Here's a quote from Nelson Mandela, who knew about oppression and hope: "There is no easy walk to freedom anywhere, and many of us will have to pass through the valley of the shadow of death again and again before we reach the mountaintop of our desires." When Mandela was being tried in 1963 at the Rivonia Trial, the trial which sent him to prison for 27 years, he thought he was going to be executed. He didn't know that he would eventually be freed or that he would be president.

We can't base our hope on seeing the outcome we want. Our hearts will break when it doesn't happen, but that's why we gather here together: to feel the pain, to grieve, and then to go back to work.

When Paul talks about the coming glory, he means that this broken, messed up world and our broken, messed up lives are not the final answer. To follow Christ is to be heir to the Easter story: the story that tells us that in the most bleak, hopeless times, God is still at work. Our God, who promised never to abandon us; our God, who brings us into the fold with Christ as God's children, pouring out his grace on everyone; bestowing upon us the inheritance of the kingdom of God, where the least are first, the hungry fed, and the poor empowered.

And if you think that you can't do anything because you're old, or you're at home, or you have less energy, or less money, think again. Have you heard of the Raging Grannies? They are a grassroots organization of activist senior women, who get out and protest with song and humour. Or in Edmonton, there's an organization called SALT: the Seniors' Action and Liaison Team. You still have things to offer past the age of 75, my friends, no matter what this world tells you! I get that you might not have the energy you had twenty, forty, sixty years ago, but doggone it, you're breathing, aren't you?!

Paul proclaims that we and this beautiful, wondrous, hurting world are promised redemption from brokenness to wholeness; from estrangement to right relationship with God.

So let's not turn around, friends. We might back up, we might need to sit down by the side of the road, we might sprain our ankles and have to hobble along leaning on someone's shoulder, but let's follow in the footsteps of all those who have not been turned around.