



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

A Hope That Does Not Disappoint  
A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

June 15, 2008  
*Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)*  
Romans 5:1-5

How many times did you wince while listening to Paul's words from his letter to the Romans? I found myself wincing quite often as I studied them for this week's sermon.

Part of the reason for my wincing has to do with the seemingly trite treatment of suffering in the life of faith. Those wonderfully poetic lines that begin, "And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character..." seem to cause the most reaction in me, and I would suspect for some of you.

If you've ever been quoted any variation of that phrase while in the midst of suffering you know how infuriating it can be.

As I thought about this text this week, I remembered a story I had forgotten. It happened the last weekend in April while I was a student at the seminary in Louisville.

Most people know that the first Saturday in May is reserved for a Louisville tradition: the running of the Kentucky Derby. There was always a two-week festival leading up to race day that engulfed the city. There would be chuck wagon parties, concerts, races, and sports tournaments. A group of us from the seminary would always enter the Kentucky Derby Festival Soccer Tournament, which was a five-on-five format played on a scaled-down field.

The story I remember springs from a moment at that soccer tournament. My friends and I were sitting beside a field watching a game when a player kicked a ball out of bounds that was on a line about 2 ½ feet off the ground, which coincidentally is just about the height of a seated adult's human head. The ball hit my friend in the side of the head, causing immediate pain, but no real injury. The player who had kicked the ball looked at her and said: "Hey, it'll build character."

"And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character..."

Wince.

How many times when searching for the right words have we stammered out some variation of Paul's theme: "We know you're suffering now, but one day you'll understand. And just look at the character it's building in you."

"I don't know why you're going through this, but it's building a better you."

Time after time, when words fail us, instead of wading into the painful waters with another, we skim a smooth stone of theological platitude across the surface and skip away as quickly as the rock we've thrown.

Is that what Paul's doing here? It can't be, can it? Or is Paul talking about something altogether different from our accustomed ways of speaking about hope?

Most often, our hope-talk is pretty shallow. "I hope I get an A on this test." "I hope

it won't rain this afternoon." "I hope no one notices I wore this shirt yesterday." Pretty simplistic ways of using a word filled with theological depth.

Surely the church has another way of speaking hope. Frederick Buechner has some wonderful lines about this distinction: "For Christians, hope is ultimately hope in Christ. The hope that he really is what for centuries we have been claiming he is. The hope that despite the fact that sin and death still rule the world, he somehow conquered them. The hope that in him all of us stand a chance of somehow conquering them too. The hope that at some unforeseeable time and in some unimaginable way he will return with healing in his wings."

Or, as Buechner says in another place: "Christianity is mainly wishful thinking.... Sometimes wishing is the wings the truth comes true on. Sometimes the truth is what sets us wishing for it."

Surely this is what Paul had in mind when he wrote these lines to the church in Rome. If there was anything the Christians in Rome knew, it was persecution and suffering. Paul wasn't about to dismiss that with trite theology spouted in a vacuum. No, he wanted them to sense that their hope lay not in their own efforts to achieve wholeness and peace, not in their own ability to persevere through suffering, but instead Paul wanted them to know in the depths of their beings that their hope was in God, who in Jesus Christ brought peace and reconciliation, and who through the continuing ministry of the Holy Spirit offers the wholeness and peace which God desires for us.

Placed in the larger context of his letter to the Romans, these words which can cause severe wincing if read across the surface embody hope when seen against the backdrop of Paul's words. Paul has borne witness to his own suffering and to the suffering of Abraham and even of the Christians in Rome. It wasn't that this suffering was to be ignored.

Rather, it was in the sense of joining Abraham in hoping against hope that what God promised God will do. In spite of what the evidence around you suggests, Paul writes, you're part of something far larger than yourself and that story's ending has been written by the God who in Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, sets things right.

This is our hope: That God has power.

This is our hope: That God through Jesus loves us beyond measure.

This is our hope: God will set things right.

With our hope so rooted, hear again Paul's words to the church in Rome, and may they produce in you and me the hope that has no end:

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

*And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 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."*