

We are in the middle of it now — this being the Third Sunday in Lent. Easter is closer than it may feel sometimes.

Especially if we are observing the season from up close, each day making our meaningful offering to God. I say “meaningful offering,” not a means to self-improvement. God sees to the heart of our cheap sacrifices, & God always loves a generous giver.

I say this not to wag my finger but to point it where the season calls us. Because there is still time. It is not too late to make something of it. You see, the purpose of Lent is not to set us up to make us fail. This journey of forty days is to draw us closer to God, & if we fall at points along the way, that is just an opportunity to hear the voice of the Lord calling us along, “Now get up & Walk on, Waiting & watching the rest of the way...”

Our journey will feel strange the more we are truly walking through the wilderness. For the wilderness always has its way with us — exposing what is in our hearts. It means business. No more fooling around. *There is something rotten in me that only God can remove.* Here I take influence from our Book of Common Prayer, which is not intended to soften the blow. We are reminded of our *miserable* condition, warts & all: “We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep... There is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders.”

And so, let me be clear. Among Christian traditions, there has been a history of inducing guilt among the faithful. But that is surely *itself* an example of human sin, *not* the purpose of naming it. To modern ears, the bluntness of the Prayer Book

sounds excessively harsh — as if it is denying human dignity or portraying us as irredeemably depraved. But there are no “participation trophies” in the race we are called to run. And the intention of strong language is not to rub our noses in our sin but to name it truthfully so that it may be healed.

In the older English of the prayer book, “health” refers to spiritual wholeness, and the confession acknowledges that apart from God’s grace we fall short of that wholeness. Pretending we are already doing well doesn’t help us face what separates us from God. Naming the wound is part of healing it, trusting that what is honestly acknowledged can also be forgiven and transformed to new life. And that brings us to Paul’s letter.

When Paul the Apostle writes to the Romans, he is speaking to a small and complicated church trying to find its footing in a vast empire. They are not living easy lives. Some are Jews, some are Gentiles. They are learning how to belong to one another in Christ. And into that fragile community Paul writes these life-giving words:

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

“Peace with God...”

Paul has a way of writing that can sound abstract at first, but this sentence is anything but. Paul is saying that our most burning question — “Where do I stand with God?” — has already been answered. Not by our performance. Not by our moral record. But by God’s grace.

To be justified is to be set in right relationship. To be restored to the health we were created to have: to belong, to be reconciled, to be *no longer at odds with the Holy One*.

And then, as he often does, Paul adds something that stops us short: “*We also boast in our sufferings.*”

Now most of us do not wake up looking for opportunities to boast about suffering. Our strained relationships, our aching knees, our medical tests, or the loneliness that can creep in as we age. So what is Paul talking about?

Paul is not glorifying pain. He is describing what God does to us in the wilderness: Suffering produces endurance. Endurance produces character. Character produces hope. And hope does not disappoint us.

You see, the wilderness is a place of exposure. A place where illusions fall away and we discover what is really in our hearts.

Sometimes the wilderness looks like a hospital waiting room where time moves differently. Sometimes it looks like a strained budget or a hard decision. Sometimes it looks like caring for someone whose strength or memory is fading. And sometimes it is simply the quiet loneliness that visits us when life does not unfold the way we expected.

You see, it's in such places that the familiar temptation meets us, the whisper that we are alone. That is the voice of the

devil — the spirit who deceives us, cornering us in our brokenness, to break us farther still.

But Paul assures us otherwise: “While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.”

Not when we were strong. Not when we had it all together.
While we were weak.

The wilderness, then, is where grace becomes visible. Where we learn that endurance is not gritting our teeth. Where the mantra to “keep calm & carry on” is replaced by Jesus’ call to follow him in hope, confident that the love of God is continually being poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

And so, as Lent continues, may we keep walking in God’s hope & love for us — naming the truth about ourselves, & trusting the mercy of God to lead us all the way to a Holy Easter. Amen.