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**PRAYER:**

Loving God,

Your servant stands ready to offer your word to your beloved people. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be wholly acceptable in Your sight. I pray for relevance, enthusiasm, authority and liberty to preach today. In the mighty name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

**INTRO:**

The Hunger Games books and movies take place in an unspecified future, in a post-apocalyptic nation of Panem. The country has twelve poor districts ruled by the wealthy Capitol. As punishment for a past rebellion against the Capitol one boy and one girl from each of the twelve districts, are selected by lottery to compete in the Hunger Games. The Games are a televised event where the participants are forced to fight to the death in a dangerous public arena. The winner and their home district are rewarded with food, supplies, and riches. The purposes of the Hunger Games are to provide entertainment for the Capitol and to remind the districts of who has the power.

**Run the clip.**

Even though he may look sweet snipping roses, President Snow of The Hunger Games is a bad dude. And while his reasoning may be based on the false assumption about hope, he makes a good point when he says, "Hope is the only thing stronger than fear." And a lot of hope – that's a dangerous thing.

President Snow prefers his hope in itty bity quantities. He uses hope to get people to do exactly what he wants them to do.

He doesn't really understand the kind of hope we are talking about today.

At least a dozen times in Paul's letter to the church at Rome, we find the Apostle talking about a particular kind of hope, and today's passage is one of them.

Paul starts off chapter five with the word, "Therefore," and that's a sure sign we'd better go back and read chapter four, so we'll know what he's referring to. Remember, a text without context -- is just a con. So let's rewind.

Chapter four is all about Abraham, who believed God's promise. Paul has just explained how Gentiles who believe in Jesus are true children of Abraham, even though they aren't Jewish. Actually Paul points out that, *Abraham* wasn't even Jewish, because "Jewish" means descended from Judah, and Judah was Abraham's great-grandson! It was Abraham's *faith* in God's promise that made him the father of many nations, and our faith in Jesus as the fulfillment of that promise is what makes us true heirs of righteousness. In other words, Paul is saying: you don't have to become Jewish to become a Christian. It's faith that matters. Okay, that's the cliff notes of chapter four.

Now we are back to... "Therefore," Paul says, "since we have been justified through faith." We've been 'what' through faith? (justified = adjusted/validated/made straight) (through faith) we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." We have peace with God. Think about that?!? Throughout the history of human existence, our relationship with God has been anything (I mean anything) but peaceful.

From the moment Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden, we have been fighting *against* God. Even when we try our hardest to stay in God's will, even when we strive to submit, we mess up. The human condition is not naturally one of peace. It is one of conflict. We see it every day in the news: at the nation's Capital on January 6<sup>th</sup>; the War in Ukraine, and mass shootings nearly every week. We see the conflict in our homes and families, in our schools, and even in our churches.

The only way we have peace with God, is because of the sacrifice of Jesus, who gives us access to the grace in which we stand. Christ opens the way for us to be reconciled to God, to be made right with God, to have peace with God.

This brings us to the heart of what the Apostle Paul is saying in these few verses that are so jam packed with meaning: "we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God" (v. 2b NIV). The NRSV says 'boast,' other translations say 'exult' or 'rejoice' and I think the word 'rejoice' is clearer for our 21<sup>st</sup> Century ears to understand. What do we rejoice in? We rejoice in .... hope!

Merriam Webster defines hope as "desire accompanied by expectation of or belief in fulfillment." In other words, hope is a dream you expect to come true.

In the clip we saw from the movie, President Snow uses hope as a tool to manipulate others, because he knows that hope is a stronger motivator than fear. But hope, real hope, is so powerful that it is difficult to contain. Too much hope *is* dangerous. It motivates people in unpredictable ways to do amazing and transformative things. And here is where President Snow is missing a critical element. He doesn't know what the Apostle Paul knows about hope. President Snow doesn't know the origin of hope. But Paul does. And he shows us the natural progression that leads to a life filled with hope in the glory of God.

Paul says, “we rejoice in hope, yes, but what’s more, we rejoice in suffering. Not because of suffering or through suffering, but in suffering.

We rejoice when we are in the middle of suffering because we know where it leads: Suffering leads to perseverance, that patient determination to never give up. Persevere, (there’s that word again Mommy!) Perseverance builds strong character, and strong character gives us hope.

This faith we have is a source of hope for the future and a source of power for the present. In 2020, when many of the young adults I was working with were heartbroken by the George Floyd murder. They kept asking me how do you endure this kind of pain and keep going? I had to remind them (and myself) that every generation has to persevere in the midst of suffering. Every single believer must hope in the face of apathy, wrongdoing, and evil.

But what do we hope for? What dream do we expect to see come true? As followers of Jesus Christ, we often say that we hope in the resurrection. But why do we hope for that? We hope for resurrection because we know it is the gateway to eternal life with God. Paul tells us that what we hope for is nothing less than the glory of God. Not just in the great by-and-by but a resurrected/new life today. We hope for a life lived in close relationship with God – today, tomorrow and for all eternity.

Our hope is knowing and being known by God so intimately that God completely reveals God’s self to us. And what is the revelation? Love.

The Love of God transforms us into justice warriors for life. As long as we are on this side of heaven we persevere. The work does not stop when we retire or we get a little arthritis. Our job is to love.

The Bible says that love requires us to act justly, to love faithfulness, and to walk humbly with your God.

I want to take a moment to look at how this congregation has chosen to act justly. Faith UMC’s stance on gay rights and its choice... not only to speak the words “Black Lives Matter” but to stand for justice in our community is a transforming and attracting love. It is the one year anniversary of our church’s reconciling vote. I want to draw our attention to that today because God’s reconciling love is active in this congregation. When believers refuse to engage in immoral or unloving practices, such countercultural resistance it makes us seem socially and politically disloyal. We suffer as a result. Such suffering is a time of testing. People left this church because of the vote.

We miss those who are gone. It hurts.

This suffering is a time of testing. Oh, and we have been through some tests in the past few years! The Apostle Paul calls for perseverance: an active overcoming of misfortune rather than a passive acceptance of it. Such perseverance produces character.

“Character” is a word used for metal that has been so heated by fire that all the impurities are refined out. The hope born of this kind of suffering is the confidence that God is transforming and refining us, until our new character produces hope!

Let me say that again.

You all missed your opportunity to shout.

Hope born from suffering to include people into the way of Jesus (that's those counter-cultural stances that make us seem socially and politically disloyal)

That work -- those stances -- produce a time of testing.

Which calls for perseverance... which transforms our character... and produces hope!

We are not in the same place we were last year when the vote was cast. When friends left this congregation. When our hearts broke. When feelings were hurt. It is true... this work of inclusion to the Way of Christ produces pain.

But God's love reconciled us through the salvific work of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection.

Christ died for us while we were still weak, still sinners, still godless, and still enemies. God's love has, therefore, not waited for us to get right but has come to meet us just as we are. No one would want to die for a wicked person—no one but Christ!

God's example is always before us!

There were religious leaders (in the day that Paul wrote this beautiful letter to Rome) that did not believe that all you had to do is confess with mouth and believe in your heart that Jesus Christ was the way. Not if you ate 'unclean' food. Not if you were uncircumcised. Not if you worked on the sabbath.

When you don't know what to say to other Christians who say **you** are not following the way of Jesus. When they say you are being political because of our stance on Black Lives Matters or LGBTQ+ rights Tell them what the Apostle Paul said... tell them, we are justified by faith!

We are called to love the stranger, the widow, and the orphan. We open our doors and lives to those on the margins... just like Jesus!

Paul says, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ who we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand! Grace! Unmerited favor! Not because of something we did. Instead it is because we know the Progression of Hope.

We boast (we rejoice) in our hope of sharing the glory of God with those **others** call sinners because we know **we are all sinners**; who only have obtained access to this grace because of what Jesus did for us! And not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces perseverance, and perseverance produces character, and character produces hope!

And hope does not disappoint us.

Hope that got my ancestors through the middle passage, Jim Crow, and today's struggles.

Hope that got Japanese Americans through internment camps during WWII and the hope for all Asian Americans to soldier on through the horrific violence today.

Hope that the LGBTQ+ community will never face another Stonewall Riot or Pulse Night Club shooting.

Hope for children across America that they will never experience another Sandy Hook, Parkland, or Uvalde school massacre.

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 and our response is to work for justice -- to take stands for our sisters and brothers who are oppressed and vulnerable... even though we may suffer.

Let me say this one last thing:

Jesus did not tell us to pick up our feather and follow him. He said pick up your cross! Because our Savior knew that there is a progression of hope:

*And it starts with suffering...*

Suffering produces perseverance,

Perseverance, character; and character, hope.

And hope does not put us to shame,

Because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

*May it be so.*

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