

3rd Sunday in Lent

Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; John 4:5-42; Romans 5:1-11

Exodus 17:1-7 is the story of God using Moses to produce water from a rock, as God's people are seemingly dying of thirst in the wilderness. On the face of it, this story seems to be a miracle story. But in reality, it is far more profound than that. Let's consider it.

“From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?” But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” So Moses cried out to the Lord, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” The Lord said to Moses, “Go on ahead of (“pass on before” – my translation) the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you (“I will stand before you” – my translation) on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Masah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying “Is the Lord among us or not?”” (17:1-7)?

The key to understanding the depth of this passage is the Hebrew word translated in the NRSV as “quarrel” (Hebrew, *rib*). Whereas the English word is most often taken to mean “complain, to find fault or to contend, often in a petty manner”, the Hebrew word *rib* is a legal term. It means “to bring suit” or “to plead your case in court” (e.g., Micah 6:1). That is, it is a technical term in Hebrew for legal proceedings that one takes when one feels wronged by another in a covenant or legally binding agreement to which both had been party. That recognition of the Hebrew used in this story is what makes sense of the story.

Israel feels wronged by God, and they act upon that perceived wrong by taking legal action against God's agent, Moses, who had negotiated the contract between God and Israel that brought the Jewish slaves out of the land of their bondage, Egypt.

Israel states its case against God. “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” The Hebrews thought they had an agreement with God. God's side of the agreement was that God would deliver them from Egyptian control (“the hand of Pharaoh”), would free them from Egypt and would take them to a “Promised Land” where they could live in freedom and peace. The people's side of the agreement was that they would obey God, be willing to stand up against the Egyptians, leave Egypt, go out into the desert and meet with God there. From their perspective, they had faithfully kept their side of the bargain. And up to this point, it seemed that God had kept his side. But now, they were facing drought, thirst and inevitable death. It was as if God had brought them out of Egypt only to abandon them in the desert and leave them to their own devices as they died of thirst. As the prophet Jonah later put it, “I have the right to be angry (with you, God,) enough to die” (Jonah 4:9). Therefore, the people of Israel brought suit against God.

Moses' first response to Israel's suit is to become defensive. "The people quarreled with (brought suit against) Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you sue me? Why do you test the Lord" (vs. 2)? Moses seeks to separate himself from God as party to the lawsuit. He is in essence arguing "Why do you shoot the messenger? I'm not the one who has brought you into the situation where you are dying of thirst. I was simply following orders. Your suit needs to be against God, not me. Take up the matter with God". But they continue to be threatening toward Moses (the only concrete manifestation of God against whom they can act), so that Moses complains to God, "What shall I do with the people? They are almost ready to stone me" (vs. 4)?

Moses brings the emergency to God. And God's response to resolve the lawsuit is most intriguing. "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you," God instructs Moses. "Take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink" (vss. 5-6).

A better translation of the Hebrew of "Go on ahead of the people" is "Pass on before the people" (ESV). The people want a trial. Well, they will get one. The courtroom selected by God is the rock at Horeb, a large and relatively level monolith. God instructs Moses to gather the people around the rock (that is, to gather them in the courtroom), and then to "pass on before the people". That is, Moses and the elders of Israel are to make a procession through the midst of the people and to the rock, for they are to be the judges for the trial while the people are to be the witnesses. Then God tells Moses, "take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile". As Moses marches into the courtroom, leading the procession of the judges (elders) of Israel, he is to be carrying with him the staff with which he confronted Pharaoh by touching the staff to the River Nile so that it turned into blood. That staff would be recognized by the people for it symbolized God's actions to begin the confrontation with Pharaoh that would culminate in their deliverance from bondage. Obviously, therefore, just as the staff was witness and instrument to judgment upon Pharaoh, so it would be witness and instrument for judgment between Israel and God!

God then assures Moses, "I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb". God assures Moses that God will be standing upon the rock of judgment, on trial before Israel! It will not be the nation or the people who will stand before God to receive sentence, but rather it will be God standing before Israel. God is willing to voluntarily place himself on trial before Israel. He is willing to accept Israel's verdict on that trial. If God is found guilty, then Israel is freed of any covenantal responsibility toward God, because God has broken covenant with them. If God is found guilty, the people may dismiss God from their midst and declare Him no longer their God. If, on the other hand, he is found innocent of the charges of abandoning them, they are to continue in covenantal obligation to him. Thus, God is the accused, standing in the dock!

The trial begins. And it is – following the expectations of that day for trials – trial by ordeal! God will prove God's innocence of the crime of which he is accused (for it was a crime in those days to break a covenantal agreement) by demonstrating his innocence (just as, in later years, a woman was deemed innocent of the accusation of witchcraft if she survived being held under water). God instructs Moses to strike the rock. Will water come forth to assuage the people's

thirst? If it does, then God is innocent of breaking the covenant. If it doesn't, then God is guilty of leading the people into the desert to die there of thirst (because there will be no water for them).

The trial by ordeal begins. Moses strikes the rock. And the rock splits open, water gushes out, and the thirst of the people is assuaged. The people are saved – and God is found innocent of the crime of abandoning the people and thus breaking God's covenant with them! But, in a larger sense, God had given to the people the water of life, the water that would save their lives, save their covenant with God, the water that came from the very courtroom and judgment seat of God (the rock at Horeb) – the water of life (e.g., Zech. 13:1; 14:8; Ezek. 47:1-12; John 4:10-14; 7:37).

But, although God is vindicated before the people and Moses' leadership is maintained, their doubting of God's integrity and of God's commitment to them requires a continual reminder. For they must remember that they had allowed themselves to doubt God and in allowing that doubt, had almost destroyed the covenant between themselves and God – a covenant that was created to eventually lead to the transformation of the whole world. Thus, the story concludes, "Moses called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled (brought a lawsuit) and tested the Lord saying, "Is the Lord among us or not" (vs. 7)? The Hebrew name "Massah" means "Test" and the name "Meribah" means "law suit" or "quarrel". Thus, every time a Jew came upon this oasis in the desert, he would be reminded that it was here that the people tested God with the challenge "Is the Lord among us or not", and God had demonstrated to them most decisively that he was indeed both among them and committed to them, no matter their situation.

Psalm 95 is a call to worship and to center one's self as a people and as a person in God. It divides into three part – the actual call to Sabbath worship (95:1-5), a second summons to worship Yahweh (vss. 6-7) and a prophetic call that states the consequences of not pausing in one's labor to worship (vss. 8-11).

The first part proclaims, "O come, let us sing to the lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth, the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed" (95:1-5).

To the Hebrew people, the number seven meant perfection. And that perfection was captured particularly in the concept of the sabbatical. Even one of Israel's Ten Commandments stated, "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it" (Exod. 20:7-11).

This portion of Psalm 95 proclaims the same message. The people of God are to gather in temple or in local assembly each Sabbath. They are to worship and sing together, to "come into

God's presence with thanksgiving", with prayer and with "songs of peace". And why? The Psalmist gives the same justification as does the Ten Commandments for stopping work and entering into the Sabbath rest of worship. God is the creator of the earth itself, "the depths of the earth, the heights of the mountains", the sea and the dry land. And this great work of creation was done in six days. So the seventh day is consecrated for human rest because it was the weekly anniversary of God's rest. Therefore, all are to enter into Sabbath rest – not only one's self but all of that Israelites' family and possessions – children and relatives, slaves and free people, even one's animals, in fact, even the alien resident in their town (who, presumably, worshipped another god than Yahweh and would therefore not be obedient to the call to Sabbath rest). All are to cease from their labors and rest – not in idleness but in the worship of Yahweh conducted within that family, in the community's gathering, in local synagogue (a later edition) or shrine (an earlier location), or in the Temple in Jerusalem. All are to rest by "making a joyful noise to Yahweh with songs of praise"!

The second portion of this psalm repeats the call to gather for worship. And that call has become a well known command to worship God. "O come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand" (vss. 6-7). Here, God is once again described as creator. But he is also pictured as the divine shepherd of God's people, who protects and cares for his sheep of a people. Respecting their creator and protector, God's people should pause from their labors which otherwise occupy all their time and "kneel before the Lord, our Maker"!

The psalm ends with a prophetic word. The people are called to stop their labor for one day a week (Exod. 20:7; Deut. 5:12-15). But they are also called to celebrate the Sabbatical week (the Festival of the First Fruits [Weeks] after the Festival of Passover, when the first harvest of the year is ready for harvest: Lev. 23:4-23), the Sabbatical Year one year out of every seven (Deut. 15:1-18; Lev. 25:1-7) and the seventh of every seven Sabbatical years (every 49th year) (Lev. 25:8-55). And that ceasing of labor is not only to focus on the worship of God but to focus that worship on righting the injustice created by a nation simply "doing business as usual" without any righting mechanism. The sabbatical regulations that "right" such injustice are those of letting the land lie fallow (Lev. 25:1-7), providing intentional sustenance for the poor (Lev. 23:22), freeing slaves (Deut. 15:12-17), releasing from all debts (Deut. 15:1-11), and redistributing the nation's wealth (Lev. 25:8-55) -- all of these being acts of worship.

But what if the people neglect such Sabbatical duty? What happens if the people refuse to take the weekly, harvest month, year-long or 49th year long Sabbatical rest?

"O that today you would listen to his voice! Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day of Massah in the wilderness, when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. For forty years I loathed that generation and said, 'They are a people whose hearts go astray; and they do not regard my ways'. Therefore in my anger I swore, 'They shall not enter my rest'" (Psalm 95:7b-11).

What happens if the people refuse to take their worshipping, justice-taking "Sabbatical rest"? That, the prophet-psalmist declares, is exactly what happened in the wilderness. The people refused to recognize that all that they had and by which they were all sustained had been given to

them by the gracious acts of God. For God had given them freedom from Egyptian slavery, escape and liberation at the Red Sea, a covenant and commandments at Mount Sinai, and even their daily sustenance of manna and water from the rock in the wilderness (the references to Meribah and Massah are references to the two incidents when God provided water out of the rock for a thirsting Israel – Exod. 17:7; Num. 20:2-13; Deut. 33:8; Psalm 106:32-33).

Thus God had provided for all of Israel's needs in the wilderness. And Israel had responded, time and time again, by "testing me and putting me to the proof – though they had seen my (previous liberating) work". So how had God responded to the continual rejection by Israel? "For forty years I loathed that generation" as they wandered in the wilderness, dying one-by-one, because "they are a people whose hearts go astray, and they do not regard my ways". So what happened to them? One by one, each of the Israelites who had physically come out of Egypt had died, one by one, in the desert until they were no more, but had been replaced by their children who had been hardened in that desert and remained faithful to God. Thus it was that the generation of Israelites released from Egyptian slavery (except for Joshua) "did not enter my rest" – the "rest" of crossing the Jordan River and entering the Promised Land. That was the inevitable result of their unwillingness to trust in and obey Yahweh. So the result was that they never got to enter the "Sabbath rest" of the Promised Land but died as they labored, day after day, in the wilderness.

Thus the Psalmist is in essence warning Israel, "See that you do not die in the midst of your labors. See that you enter the Sabbath "rest" of the weekly worship of God, of the festival "rest" of taking from your abundance to provide sustenance for your town's poor, that you take the one-year sabbatical "rest" so that your land may recuperate from being farmed, that you forgive the debts of those who owe you, and that your slaves can be set free, and that you take the Jubilee rest of one year ever seventh Sabbatical Year so that all your land is given back to its original owners and so that you can receive back the land given to your family by Joshua, so that Israel's wealth can be redistributed. Then, when you do these things, you are acting as a nation, as a people and as individual Jews and are worshipping Yahweh by serving humanity, and thus creating a just society for all its people! When we worship God this way, then we are authentically worshipping God and we display that we are indeed "the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand"!

John 4:5-42 is the well-known story of Jesus and the woman of Samaria. Jesus and his disciples are traveling through the country of Samaria on their way from Jerusalem to Galilee (Jews of his day could either take a short-cut from Judea to Galilee through Samaria or they could go the long way around Samaria by sticking close to the Jordan River. Since the Jews avoided the Samaritans, most chose the longer route, but Jesus and his disciples had taken this shorter route). They arrive at the Samaritan town of Sychar by midday, so his disciples go into the town to buy lunch for their traveling party while Jesus rests at the well of Jacob on the outskirts of the town.

While Jesus is at the well, a woman of Samaria comes to the well to gather water. Jesus asks her for a cup of water, and this results in a conversation between the two. During that conversation, Jesus both demonstrates that he knows her sin and tells her he is the Messiah. She returns to the village to testify, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be

the Messiah, can he” (vs. 29)? On hearing this, the people leave their activities and head to the well.

Meanwhile, the disciples return to the well with lunch. Jesus shares with them of the encounter with the woman, and tells his disciples, “You say, “Four months more, then comes the harvest”. But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are already ripe for harvesting” (vs. 35)!

The people arrive at the well, invite Jesus back into their town, and he ministers to and teaches them there for the next two days. When he leaves, the people say to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world” (vs. 42).

Now that we have surveyed the story, let’s look at it much more closely. This story is intentionally designed to show how much Jesus is breaking tradition and even the conventional standards and foundational beliefs of his people. First, he is choosing to go through the nation that his fellow Jews would go to great lengths to avoid. Second, he is at the well at noon when a woman comes to draw water; a woman wouldn’t be at the well at noon unless she was an outcast – ostracized from her own people. Third, Jesus speaks to her, which is breaking multiple taboos. Thus, Jews don’t speak to Samaritans. Men don’t speak to women. A man who is alone doesn’t speak to a woman who is alone. And a man doesn’t ask a woman who is a stranger for a drink of water, placing himself in the position of a supplicant.

Any of these actions were socially unacceptable. All of these actions, taken together, are outrageous! We cannot appreciate how radically Jesus was moving beyond acceptable bounds. It was simply outrageous behavior, a thorough flouting of convention!

Even the woman acknowledges this. She is as shocked at Jesus’ behavior as the Jewish reader would have been. She says, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria” (4:9)? She is stunned and perhaps even offended at his behavior.

But now the chasm has been breached. All the conventions have been removed. And now, one human being can deal directly with another human being. So it is that into what was once a deeply divided cultural relationship, Jesus can bring the healing waters of life!

Jesus now twists his request for a drink into a witness to his ministry. “Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (4:13-14). Jesus offers salvation to this Samaritan ostracized woman. God’s redemption is for the most marginalized of people. So she responds by expressing interest (vs. 15).

We then discover the reason for her being ostracized by the ostracized Samaritans. She has been married five times and is now living with a man not her husband (vs. 18). For this, she is ostracized by the Samaritans.

But the Samaritans who have ostracized this woman are themselves, guilty of “having had five husbands” and a lover. For they, as a nation, had intermarried with five foreign nations (Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, the Ptolemaic Empire, the Selucid Empire), and now with Rome had not adopted their practices but still consorted with them. For this, they were ostracized by the Jews, who had always resisted the enemy and not been amalgamated by them.

The woman, being exposed, seeks to divert the conversation to whether it is more appropriate to worship God at the Temple in Jerusalem or the sanctuary on Mount Gerizim (“this mountain” – vs. 20). But Jesus pushes her toward a far greater truth.

“The hour is coming and is now here”, he says, “when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (4:23-24).

True worship, Jesus is saying, is not national worship; it is not worship (even of God) within a national context. It is worship within a community of believers! And it is worship “in spirit and in truth” (picking up themes presented in John, ch. 1).

The woman responds, “I know that Messiah is coming.” Jesus responds with the most startling confession. “Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you”” (4:26).

Jesus replies “Ego eimi” – “I am”. This is the first of his many “I am” statements in the Gospel of John, in which Jesus intentionally uses the name of God given by God to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:28). Jesus is literally saying, “I am Yahweh!”

On top of this, Jesus acknowledges that he is the Messiah. And this is the only time in the Gospel of John that Jesus accepts the title of Messiah, acknowledging that this is who he is.

The point is that Jesus makes this acknowledgement, accepts his being named the Messiah and takes it a step further by stating that he and Yahweh are one and the same – he accepts this acknowledgement from the lips of a Samaritan woman! It is not the religious establishment that perceives Jesus as Lord. It is a Samaritan woman – an ostracized, marginalized woman of an ostracized, marginalized people! It is only such as these who perceive Jesus for who he truly is!

The next segment of the story of Jesus and the woman of Samaria is that of Jesus’ challenge to the disciples (4:27-38). In this portion of the story, the disciples return to the well to find Jesus engaged in dialogue with this woman. They were “astonished” – shocked, disturbed agitated – “that he was speaking with a woman”. The text is quite explicit, however, in indicating that no disciple challenged Jesus with what he was doing. Rather, they muttered among themselves about these infractions of Jewish tradition in regards to women and to Samaritans, and to the possibility that he had dined with this woman (vs. 33).

What stands out here is how clearly the author of this gospel seeks to contrast the behavior of the woman and the disciples. She is open about her ignorance and seeks the truth. Jesus’ disciples seek to cover up their ignorance, act as if nothing were awry, and do not challenge Jesus about his behavior (vs. 27), and thus seek to learn from him. In essence, the disciples – who, by

definition, are to be those learning from Jesus – are as ignorant as anyone else. Being categorized as a disciple didn't make one any more knowledgeable of the ways of God. One had to be an active, insistent, even assertive learner. That was what this woman was. And that is not what John perceives Jesus' disciples as being!

The woman leaves Jesus (apparently in such haste, she forgets her water jar or intentionally leaves it behind so she can move more rapidly to the village – vs. 28), goes to the village and tells them about Jesus. The townspeople hurry out to meet Jesus!

Apparently, the people are so hurrying up the road to meet Jesus that they are able to be seen both by him and his disciples as they rush along. Jesus then says to his disciples, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest?’ But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields (that is, the people scurrying up the road) are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps’. I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor” (4:34-38).

God has called the disciples – and all the followers of Jesus – to witness to his transforming work. And the world is ripe for harvesting – people and communities eager to hear the truth. Sometimes you don't even have to “sow” the seed of the gospel, for others have done so before you. Sometimes, all you need to do is to “reap” a harvest ripe for reaping.

But to be able to so contribute to the forwarding of “the light”, the disciples must be willing to seek the light. They must be willing to question, to debate, to learn. And they must be willing to “color outside the lines” – to think in new and dangerous ways, to recognize that “time makes ancient good uncouth” and thus to be open, flexible and receptive to the unpredictable ways in which God may choose to work!

John 4:28-30, 39-42 is the concluding story of the woman at the well. The woman returns to the village and invites the villagers to meet Jesus with the words, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” (vs. 29). The villagers come out, meet with Jesus, and are so impressed with him, they ask him to postpone his trip to Galilee and spend time with them – which he, indeed, does. After being taught by Jesus, the villagers proclaim to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world” (vs. 42).

Several things stand out in this ending to this pivotal story. First, even though she has only a limited knowledge of Jesus, the woman becomes a witness to him, telling her fellow villagers about him and inviting them to meet him. This outcast foreign woman becomes only the second person in the Gospel of John to bear witness to Jesus – the first having been John the Baptizer. So the second person to join the company of those who bear witness to Christ is a woman, a foreigner, a person of a marginalized people, and an outcast among those people.

Second, the villagers come and meet with Christ. And once, having met with him, they become convinced as well that he is the Messiah (vs. 42). One can witness to Christ, but eventually

meeting with Christ personally and face-to-face must become one's authority for knowing Christ. And once one has met Christ personally, it is no longer necessary to have a witness!

Third, in meeting with Jesus, what the villagers discover is that this One is not only the Messiah, but is also "the Savior of the world" (vs. 42). It is important to recognize that this is a title used exclusively of the Roman emperor.¹ Since this is so, the only interpretation one can logically put on John 4:42 is that these Samaritan villagers have – in the light of their meeting with Jesus – replaced their emperor with Jesus! They are no longer living with "the one you have now is not your husband" (4:18). They are now no longer being seduced by Rome, as they once have been. Nor are they married to another emperor or god-king as they had earlier been with five successive empires. They have now changed allegiance for the last time, and they now recognize Jesus as their Messiah and Savior both of their world and of the whole world!

Romans 5:1-11 is a point of transition in Paul's letter to the church in Rome. Up to this point, Paul has been presenting his argument for authentic faith in and relationship to God upon the gift of God's grace, not earned by us through our obedience to the Law nor our good works. This grace is appropriated for our lives by our response of faith that is witnessed to by our good works, but it is not the works that gains that grace. Rather, it is freely given to us by God.

Now, in this passage, Paul leaves his argument about the origins of faith to talk about the results of God's grace. He writes, "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" (5:1-2). The tense used by Paul in his writing of "since we are justified by faith" indicates a completed state of action; that is, God has already acted to justify us through God's grace appropriated to us by our faith.

Of course, one could question whether he or she has sufficient faith to appropriate such grace. But the very way Paul has written this statement is to insist that such thinking is a moot point. Our appropriating faith isn't something we generate within ourselves; it is generated within us by God (theologians call this "irresistible grace"). Faith is not somehow mustered up in us by our own actions. Rather, God has made the gospel so irresistible to those who embrace it that they cannot help but embrace it. They are pulled toward it; they feel almost compelled to embrace it because it has already embraced them.

Such an understanding of God's work in our lives was beautifully captured by the former drug-addict, Francis Thompson, who described Christ as a hunting hound who kept on his trail, no matter how Thompson tried to throw him off: "I fled Him, down the nights and down the days; I fled Him down the arches of the years; I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind; and in the midst of tears I hid from those strong Feet that followed, followed after. But with unhurrying chase and unperturbed pace, deliberate speed, majestic instancy they beat – and a Voice beat more instant than the Feet – "All things betray thee, who betrayest Me"."²

¹ Koester, Craig, "The Savior of the World (John 4:42)", *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 109, no. 4:665-680, 1990b, pp. 666-667.

² Francis Thompson, "The Hound of Heaven", *The World's Great Religious Poetry*, edited by Caroline Miles Hill (NY: The Macmillan Co., 1923), p. 45.

Because God will pursue us until God catches us, “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus”. Living in Shalom – that is, living at one with God and our neighbor, practicing justice, equitable sharing of wealth and a relational faith – doesn’t come about as a result of our own determined activity. Rather, it is the inevitable result of being authentically captured by God’s irresistible grace! Some ancient manuscripts read “let us have peace with God”, thus making peace our responsibility. But that isn’t the logical extension of Paul’s argument here. His argument is that God is doing a work in us by God’s grace that inevitably drives us toward the living out of peace in our lives. The pivotal question in this passage (and what precedes and follows this passage) is “Who’s in control around here?” And Paul’s answer is, “It is God who is in control”. Thus we respond to God’s grace because God fascinates us with the longing to respond, and such response pursued in us by God results in God’s peace permeating us and our actions and performance in the world. We are driven to be peacemakers!

Paul develops this argument further by examining the suffering that inevitably comes from responding to God’s peace and thus becoming peacemakers. “We boast in our sufferings, knowing that 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” (vss. 3-5).

Because God is continually at work in our lives and hearts as those who have responded to God’s grace, we who are believers will grow strong in both our faith and actions, and will actually rejoice in the adversity we face. We will rejoice in it because we recognize that suffering is not the end of life. Rather, as those who keep their hearts open to God’s loving work in our lives, suffering will strengthen our capacity to endure, endurance will cause us to mature in Christ and become a far deeper, centered and compassionate individual or community (i.e., we’ll have character), and character will produce hope within us.

The biblical concept of hope is not that of wishful thinking, but rather the assurance of something not yet fully experienced but which is already God’s gift to us (Hebrews 11:1). Thus, what Paul is arguing here, is that God is already working in the lives of the community and its people. That redemptive work – if it is truly to be liberating – must entail suffering, because it is only through suffering that either a person or a community will build endurance (“stick-to-itiveness”), character (becoming a more centered and compassionate people) and hope (living in the assurance that God knows what God is about and will bring us to God’s intentions for us).

Of course, suffering can produce despair and cynicism. But among those whom God “has justified by faith” and given the “peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”, God is at work to shape that person and community through the discipline of suffering into that which God intends for all of us. So we can live in that awareness and hope, and thus understand that we are all a work in progress – and God knows what God is about!

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