

*Exodus 17:1-7*  
*Romans 5:1-11*  
*John 4:5-42*

“Is the Lord among us or not?” (*Exod. 17:7*) The Israelites asked this question in our Old Testament lesson. I know many others who ask this. Or who wonder who this God is, who allows such horrible things to happen.

Today our texts are filled with water imagery and longing and God's response. But lately we have very seen very different pictures of water. Overwhelming water, which overtook the lives of our brothers and sisters in Japan. The news showed, over and over again, scenes of water that seemed to have a force and a mind of its own. That water brought fear and longing and death. After the earthquake, the water of the tsunami was like a tidal wave of suffering.

There are times when the suffering in our lives feels like a tidal wave, pouring over all that we know, sweeping the ground from under us. That has seemed to be the case in my small world lately. The news seems to hold story after story of international oppression or violence or suffering. It runs close to home, too. My mother has been in the hospital for about a week and a half, though she may be sent home today. I know people who are truly struggling, as if a wave has knocked them for a loop, and no ground remains.

Like a tsunami wave, the suffering rises and falls, and then rises again. It can bring us grief and frustration. It invites our questions for God, perhaps about justice or mercy or life – questions which often don't seem to have answers. Or if there are answers, we may not want to hear them.



As we hear in the letter to the Romans, St. Paul was very aware of the suffering that we face in our lives. You may remember from last week, Paul was writing about the promises that Abraham received through faith. Any sense of our righteousness, or of us being made more just and right and whole people, comes only from God. It's a gift of God through the faith that we received through Christ.

Jesus Christ offered and gave us faith, along with “access to... grace.” With those gifts, we receive “peace with God” and “our hope of sharing the glory of God.” (*Rom. 5:1-2*) It makes sense that we would boast about such things, right? Of course we want to celebrate the great things that God has given us. That's part of what we share with others when we share the good news. The promise of that wonderful hope of God's loving and just reign enables us to feel confident and proud – even boastful.

Yet Paul also wrote that we should “boast in our sufferings,” which frankly doesn't feel like a natural choice. (*Rom. 5:3*) Even in the times when we wonder, “Is the Lord among us or not?” (*Exod. 17:7*) People of all ages have suspected that God – or the gods – gave gifts of blessing as rewards.

As in the story of Job, when life goes wrong, we often wonder what we (or they) have done to warrant such events.

Paul called his listeners away from wondering about injustice, or complaining about God's absence. In the middle of his discussion about God's gift of faith, and the promises with it, he named God's gifts amid suffering. He described the spiritual growth that can occur, growing from the ground of our suffering. We "know... that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us..." (*Rom. 5:3-5*) He named God as deeply present amid our fear and pain. "...[B]ecause God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." (*Rom. 5:5*)

It's not an explanation of why there is suffering. But it is an answer to the Israelites' question. "Is the Lord among us or not?" (*Exod. 17:7*) Yes, even in suffering the answer is yes. For look at what God is doing! Blessing us with virtues of endurance and character and hope, born of our times of struggle. He observed some of God's good, which changes us and our lives, which can come out of the deepest woes. For those who have received grace and peace through Jesus Christ, our sufferings in the world bear fruit in our lives and in our faith.

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Perhaps the most difficult part is that the gospel does not stop there. Simply saying that we grow from our sufferings isn't that big of a deal.

God's wonderful grace and love came to us in our hurting world. "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." (*Rom. 5:6*) What Paul doesn't say is that in Christ, God came to our suffering, and then he suffered himself. In Christ, God came to us, a helpless baby, a refugee who had to flee the powerful to preserve his life. In Christ, God wept – and turned over tables of the temple in anger. At the end of his life, Christ was beaten and bruised only days after he was honored and praised. He hung on a cross to suffer a painful and humiliating death.

God's very self was revealed to humanity amid suffering. God's loving grace was unveiled in Christ's deep vulnerability, humility, and weakness. In Christ's witness and life, we see something very important about ourselves revealed, too. We sense the limits of our lives, bound by what our bodies and wills and hearts can handle. At the same time, we behold the endless possibilities of lives when they are immersed in God's blessings. In God working through our compassion and care, our willingness to serve, our gratitude and hope, in the many other gifts we receive from one another through our faith.



We may wonder, "Is the Lord among us or not?" (*Exod. 17:7*) In faith, we turn to God, in our weakest, most frustrating, humiliating, and humbling moments. We are fed by gentle streams of living water. And the answer is so clearly, "Yes." God most certainly was and is here. Amen.