Jesus’ earthly mission is introduced in Luke’s Gospel this way. He came to proclaim good news to the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed. About 2000 years later the poor, captive, blind and oppressed are still among us. Has anything changed? One thing that has changes is that they, and we, can live in hope. That makes all the difference.

PRAYER

When Jesus announced the beginning of his ministry in that synagogue in Nazareth, he said he was bringing good news to the poor, captive, blind and oppressed. He didn’t say there would no longer be poor, captive, blind and oppressed people. In fact, at one point he did say that the poor would always be among us.

Did the good news that Jesus brought change the status or eliminate the conditions of those people. Once you have Jesus in your heart, does poverty end? Do all blind people see? The good news was tied to the fact that now Jesus was among them. Furthermore, Jesus is also the risen Lord and Savior that has opened a way into heaven. Because of the cross and the empty tomb, there will be an end of poverty, captivity, blindness, and oppression some day. Is that only reserved for heaven, or does it have any impact on our lives in this world? Or another way to put it. Does it make any difference that those conditions, our suffering in this world, occur in the hope of the resurrection in the name of Jesus the Christ?

For that answer I would like to turn to Romans 5. In that chapter Paul makes a bold affirmation that suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope, and hope doesn’t disappoint because it is packaged in God’s love. I have pondered the truth of that statement on many occasions, especially in my own suffering. I will admit that it has often been a struggle. Sometimes I would rather stop the suffering rather than build up my character. So I want to look at Paul’s statement through the eyes of Martin Luther, my mother, and a young man of deep faith.

Luther commented on this passage in his lectures on Romans at the University at Wittenburg. He explained how suffering leads to building character. “Of what ever quality suffering finds people to be, such it makes them even more. If carnal, weak, blind, evil, arrogant – they become more so in suffering. Those who are spiritual, brave, wise, good, meek – become more so under suffering.” In other words crabby people become more crabby, patient people
become more patient. I would also add that faith in the presence of Christ empowers us to display positive attitudes in suffering. Then faith actually deepens.

As an example I will share my mother’s reaction to learning she had breast cancer. Of course the initial news was a shock and scary to her. Questions needed to be answered in a hurry. The diagnosis was scary in the fact that several lymph nodes were involved in the infection which can mean the cancer cells were traveling to other parts of her body. The treatment regimen was prescribed. Then my mother’s deep faith and character came into play. She was ready for whatever would come. She had led a full life, her children were taken care of and she knew her heavenly home was waiting for her. She suffered through the treatments, and has been cancer free for several years. The only thing that really bugs her now is the hot flashes from the medicine she has to take for another year. So she continues to do her volunteer work, plays bridge several times a week, and consoles old friends who have lost a spouse, as she has. I would like to live in that kind of hope when my turn comes.

One more story about character and hope. It is told by Dr. William Willimon. A young school teacher was driving home from work when a car coming in the opposite direction suddenly swerved into her lane and hit her car head on. Her husband, a man of faith, took up a vigil at her hospital bed. For weeks she lay in a coma, lingering somewhere between life and death. One day, when he was allowed, the young husband went also to visit the man whose carelessness had nearly killed his wife. In deep grief, uncertain whether his wife would live, the young man forgave the driver for what he did to his wife. Before he could leave, a man in the next bed asked if he could speak with the young man about God. If the power of God could break through such pain and bring forgiveness in the face of grief, then that was a God he wanted to know.”

We are justified by God’s grace through faith. Therefore we have peace with God. His love is poured out into our hearts. Christ was raised from death so that we could live a new life in him. There’s where our hope lies. It is in the glory of God and his choosing to be our God not only here but in the heavenly realm.

That is our reason for and only source of hope. Can you imagine someone without faith reading Paul’s words, scratching his head, and saying, “I don’t get it. How can one get from suffering to endurance, to character, to hope. It doesn’t make any sense. The world doesn’t work that way.” Which is true. The world indeed doesn’t work that way. To say suffering leads
to hope is absurd.

The only way it can make sense is if that truth comes from someplace other than this world and its captivity to sin and death. Didn’t Jesus say he brought good news to the captive? We are not captive to sin and death when we are in Christ. If our hope was only focused on this present age we would remain captive. But we have been set free. We live by faith that there is more to life than meets the eye and ear and touch. There is a life where suffering and tears no longer exist. So we who have died in Christ through baptism, have risen to the promise of eternal life in the resurrection to come. So we live in hope, and so we are not disappointed. Amen.