

**“Cutting a Path Through Suffering”**

**Job 1:1; 2:1-10; Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12**

Today we celebrate World Communion Sunday  
and, as Presbyterians, we give our Peacemaking Offering.

And on this day we make an outstanding claim:  
that, in Jesus Christ, we are *united*  
with men, and women, and children around the globe  
who share this meal with us.

This claim is both encouraging and unsettling,  
when you consider the conditions under which  
many of our brothers and sisters in Christ are living  
throughout the world.

At this table, their concerns become our concerns,  
their sufferings, our sufferings,  
their victories, our victories,  
their hope, our hope.

Actually, we make this claim not just once a year,  
but every time we join together as the body of Christ.

But on World Communion Sunday we celebrate our unity with the worldwide church  
with a special urgency,  
so today it is also especially important for us to remember  
the reason for our common hope.

There are different ways of speaking of our hope:

The Apostle Paul says our hope is in this:

That “in Christ, God is reconciling the world to himself.”

The Gospel of John puts it another way, saying

That Jesus “came that [we] might have life, and have it abundantly.”

Or again, Paul in Corinthians, who is confident

That “[God] who began a good work in [us] will bring it to completion  
on the day of Christ Jesus.”

Now these are all rather optimistic claims to make in a world like ours...

in a world where (as Ruth Marlin shared with us last week)

children who sit with us at this table

are regularly maimed or killed by landmines,

and in a world where Middle East peace plans fail by the dozen

before they ever get started,

and in a world of *jihad*, car bombs, hijackings, snipers

and in a world where the solutions offered to these problems always involve  
more violence, or the threat of more violence.

In such a world as ours, the claims of the Christian faith are *profoundly* optimistic.

Of course, we don't even have to look very far to know this.

Just knowing what we know

about the strife in our own families;

or the conditions of our working lives,

where we knock ourselves out to please all the right people

so we can keep a decent job in a struggling economy;

or the condition of our bodies

which grow tired and weak under stress,

and are susceptible to illnesses of every kind,

and limit us far more than we want to admit.

Still, knowing what we know about this world and about our lives,

we make the claim

that in the simple act of breaking this bread and sharing this cup

*God moves us closer to his peaceable kingdom.*

Many people in our world are not willing to make any such claim about God.

They have concluded that the grand mess the world is in

is proof that life is about “the survival of the fittest,”

and that God is merely

the desperate invention of our deep longings for a better world.

Others may believe that God does exist,

but that he cares nothing about our plight

and remains distant in the heavens, removed from all human suffering.

Their advice to us would be like that of Job’s wife:

“Why do you persist in your integrity? Curse God and die.”

Or at least,

“Forget about God, live in a meaningless world, watch out for yourself,

and pursue your own happiness to the best of your ability.”

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But we are here today, gathered at this table,

*because we are believers* – or earnestly want to be believers,

and we have not stopped hoping in God.

For those of us who believe, or try to believe,

the letter of Hebrews adds a new depth to our belief.

In our reading today, Hebrews insists that God,

far from being removed or disinterested in our lives,

has spoken directly to you and me by the Son,

who came into the world as (SLOWLY)

*“the reflection of God’s glory*

*the exact imprint of God’s very being*

*to sustain all things by his powerful word.”*

Hebrews also says that even before the Son came in the flesh,  
in fact, from the beginning of creation,  
the Son has been at work in the world to bring about God's purposes  
and to sustain the world by his powerful word,  
and to save the world from the sin and evil  
that threatens to tear it apart.

That's nice, says the skeptic (and maybe that skeptic is you, maybe it's me).

That's nice, but this all sounds a little naïve – even absurd –  
given the sorry state of our world.

Just look around – how can such a hopeful vision be true?

Well, it is that very objection, that very real observation,  
that serves as the pivotal point in this text from Hebrews:

*As it is*, says Hebrews  
(perhaps these three little words  
are the most theological significant words  
in today's reading?)

*As it is*, says Hebrews, *we do not yet see everything in subjection...*

*As it is*, the world is a mess

*As it is*, our lives are a pitiful excuse for the grandeur God intended for human life  
which Hebrews describes when it says  
*you have crowned the human race with honor and glory.*

*As it is*, the honor and glory of the human race is grotesquely corrupted.

*As it is*, the church – as God's agent in the world –  
seems fairly ineffective to bring about the transformation of the world,  
which makes us begin to wonder if our God might be ineffective  
to bring about the transformation of the world.

*As it is*, what reason do we have for hope?

Hebrews concedes the point:

*As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection...but we do see Jesus.*

And our hope – the hope of the world – depends on what we see in Jesus.

Our hope does not depend on what we see in the world around us,

but on what we see in Jesus.

And in Jesus we see that the world *as it is*

is not the world *as it will be* when God is through with it.

What we see in Jesus is this:

We see one who *was for a little while made lower than the angels*

(that is, he was human – in the world – like us)

*but now is crowned with glory and honor...*

And why is he crowned with glory and honor? (**This is odd!**)

*...because of the suffering of death,*

*so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.*

In Jesus, we see the mystery of God's plan,

that *through his sufferings*, Jesus has become the *pioneer of our salvation*.

We have hope because God is not removed from the suffering of the world,

standing back like some calloused despot who cares nothing for his people,

but God is immersed into our suffering in Jesus

who goes before us into our suffering, in to your suffering –

into the most stressful of your days and the darkest of your nights –

and ultimately, even into your death.

Like a pioneer, cutting a path through the wilderness,

Jesus cuts a path for you through your suffering,

to shows you the way into the presence of God.

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In my work as a pastor,

people come to me when they are at their wit's end  
when life has overwhelmed them  
when the extremity of their suffering has pushed them  
to the limits of their faith.

Most people are not looking for some magic formula or miraculous prayer

that will suddenly change their circumstances.

What so many *are* looking for is some reason to hope

some reason not to give up their faith, but to believe  
that God has not abandoned them,  
but still loves them and remains with them.

That is just the kind of hope that is offered to those who gather

at this Table.

What the church has to offer to a suffering world

is the real presence of Jesus right in the midst of our mess  
right where we live.

One of the things that defines the Christian community

is our practice of bearing one another's burdens.

The Apostle Paul wrote in Corinthians about the body of Christ

saying "*if one member suffers, all suffer together,  
if one member is honored, all rejoice together.*"

To be the church is to laugh and sing with each other in times of joy and celebration,

and to cry and hurt and stay with each other in times of pain and suffering.

It is this latter activity – the sharing of suffering –

that stands out in defining the Christian community,

because it is as we journey with one another through the wilderness of suffering

that the light of the gospel shines most brightly,  
and has its greatest effect.

This worldwide table is a visible sign of that invisible reality,  
a sign of our fellowship with one another,  
with the Body of Christ,  
with other believers who walk this journey with us –  
both near and far away.

And it is a visible sign of our hope:  
For here in the breaking of bread, and the pouring out of this cup  
we catch a glimpse of Jesus who goes before us  
cutting a path through the wilderness,  
a path that will lead us to God  
and to the joy of God's heavenly feast.