



1616 W. Mequon Road, Mequon WI 53092  
(262)241-3121 [www.stjohnsmequon.org](http://www.stjohnsmequon.org)  
Email: [office@stjohnsmequon.org](mailto:office@stjohnsmequon.org)  
Pastor James Tiefel  
(262) 853-9723 (cell#)  
Email: [pastortiefel@gmail.com](mailto:pastortiefel@gmail.com)

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## The Second Sunday in Lent

### February 28, 2021

#### We Live under the Cross

It's impossible for us to know how Jesus felt as he faced the ugly reality of the cross. How did he deal with the disloyal rejection of his own people, the brutal pain of torture and death, and the punishment he would endure from God as he carried the sins of the world? We cannot know, of course—but we know that he accepted his mission and saved the world and us. We also carry crosses as we follow Jesus and these crosses we know well. We endure them so that we can share the Savior's glory.

**First Reading**            **Job 1:13-22**  
*Job confessed his faith even under the cross.*

**Second Reading**        **Romans 5:1-11**  
*We glory in the cross.*

**Gospel**                    **Mark 8:31-38**  
*Jesus carried his cross; we prepare to carry ours.*

**Sermon**                  **Romans 5:1-11**

#### A Hope That Does Not Disappoint Because of Jesus' cross Despite our own crosses

Why do we get disappointed? Why do we feel short-changed when things don't work out? A dinner date didn't quite go as well as you thought it would. You look at your bank account and you feel defeated. The school your kids or grandkids go to is implementing some strange new changes during this pandemic. At the moment, work seems to be giving you more resentment than joy. This is nothing new; we encounter disappointment all the time. But why do we get so bent out of shape? It's because of *hope*. Don't get me wrong; hope is a good thing! Hope can motivate us and move us through life. But let me clarify: we get disappointed because of the things we put our hopes *in*. Things like our love life, our financial security, our health, or our careers. As much joy and fulfillment as these things sometimes bring us, they eventually let us down in one way or another. Things let us down. People let us down. They join the list of hopes that disappoint us.

But in these verses for today, Paul shares some good news. He gives us reason to get rid of shallow and shakable hopes, and to instead look at a solid, secure hope; a hope that won't let us down. Paul explains that **we have a hope that does not disappoint**, *because of Jesus' cross*, and *despite* our own crosses.

**Because of Jesus' cross**

First, Jesus' cross. But to do that, we need to start at the beginning, back in Genesis. Ever since Adam and Eve's fall, we can count on one thing: sin. By nature, we were born dead in sin. And because of this sinful nature, we sin daily. Right from our first day on earth, we had a severed relationship with God. Our sin separated us from him and made us deserving of an eternal separation from him. This was the punishment we expected.

But then God did something unexpected. Verse 8 says, "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." *While we were still sinners*. In what world should that make sense? Nothing made us worthy of God's love. That's what makes grace, grace. It's unexpected, but it's the way our God works.

And through Jesus, we now have a restored relationship with God. We have peace; everything is as it should be between us and him because we have access to his grace through Jesus. The picture here is like a dirty, poor peasant admitted into the king's throne room to speak with the king. Nothing about the peasant makes him worthy; in fact, his appearance suggests how unworthy he is! Yet the king not only allows the peasant in, but he treats him like an old friend. He showers him with gifts, brings out the finest food, and he listens to the peasant. He doesn't just let him in; he shows that he loves him. And the king has absolutely nothing to gain from this friendship, but he gives it freely. It's unexpected. It's what makes grace, grace.

Paul also describes this grace as something "in which we now stand." That's because we're not chasing after it. It's not behind us, in the past. It's not just in the future. *It's right now*. We stand in it. We have a sure hope right now because of what Jesus did for us while we were sinners, while we were peasants. He took up his cross and died for us. He had nothing to gain from it. But he wanted to win us with his love. So, he died for peasants who by nature had a hostile relationship with God. And he restored our relationship with him in his grace.

Because of Jesus' cross, we have a sure hope of heaven! It's not a fragile, fleeting hope like watching the weather report, hoping for a snow day. It's not uncertain, like the up-and-down activity of COVID. It's an objective, outside-of-us hope that is true no matter how we feel.

A pastor I know has a thoughtful picture for this hope. He says this hope is like the sun. We may not always think the sun is shining; there are cloudy and stormy days that hide its rays. There are times we may not feel the sun on our faces. The clouds might be covering it, and you may not see its beauty or feel its warmth...but it's there, whether we feel it or not.

This is what our sure hope in Christ is like. Because of Jesus' cross, we have a hope that does not disappoint us.

### **Despite our own crosses**

Paul talks about more than Jesus' cross in these verses. He also describes the role of suffering in the lives of Christians. And when we take a look, we see that this hope still doesn't disappoint us *despite* our crosses.

Scripture tells us we will suffer. Paul tells us that in his letters, like in our verses for today. Jesus tells us that in our gospel reading from Mark 8. Our first reading showed us that in Job's life as well.

Our lists of suffering may look different. As Christians, don't we often feel out of place, moving against the crowd, having the uncomfortable feeling of being a foreigner? Your personal suffering might look

different too. I can't see into your hearts and understand the suffering you've endured, but I know enough people to know that God may allow crosses into your lives that will press you, test you, and at times get the best of you.

We're familiar with suffering. It's just a part of life! And so, we should all be surprised at what Paul says in verse 3: "Not only so, but we also *glory* in our sufferings." How can we glory in our sufferings? How can something bad give us reason to rejoice? How could Paul be so foolish?

Paul can say this because of what Jesus has done. Because we have the sure, rock-solid hope built on Jesus' sure, rock-solid promises. God has given us this hope to guide us like a compass and to root us like a tree. That's how we can rejoice in our crosses, despite the pain, despite the pressing, despite the testing.

As I was growing up, one of my dad's hobbies was woodworking. He had a workshop out in our garage. As a kid, I would sometimes go out to Dad's workshop and "give him a hand." I remember one time we were refinishing a table. Our job was to sand it down to its base layer so we could apply a new coat of finish. To my untrained carpenter's eye, the table looked fine as it was. But my dad always knew better. He took his sander and started rubbing off the old coat of finish. In my head I thought, "Dad, what are you doing?!" I thought it was a perfectly good coat. It wasn't until we had finished sanding the table, smoothed out its rifts and ridges, and applied a fresh coat of finish that I realized I was wrong. The table looked way better when it was done. It was beautiful.

Isn't that the way God introduces suffering into our lives? He grabs his sander of suffering and he gets to work. And it can hurt. We say, "Father, what are you doing?!" We think we know better than the one who made us, but in reality, God always knows best. God uses suffering to whittle us down to our base layers. He strips off pride, and removes all our hopes in things that will let us down, till we're left with nothing. But then he applies fresh coats. He paints on perseverance and character. Because a good carpenter knows his tools, but more than that, he knows how to bring out the best in the material he's working with.

God wants us to stop putting our hope in things that will let us down, and that we start looking at the one thing that will save us. It's his greatest project: Jesus' cross.

Suffering was always in God's blueprint for salvation. When he in his workshop of heaven looked at us poor, miserable sinners, he fashioned a cross that only his Son could bear.

And his plan was for us to suffer, too. He fashions crosses for us to carry, not so that we can achieve our own salvation but so that we turn to him alone. He gives us crosses not so that we crumble under their weight, but so that we look to the one who can help us bear our crosses.

And isn't that the way our God works? He uses things that are unexpected. He sent his Son to earth to live as a human, a baby born in a humble stall. His Son walked this earth not as a king adorned in wealth and glory, but as a wandering rabbi, surrounded by a rag-tag crew of disciples. His victory was suffering the most shameful death at that time. For you, and for me. He suffered hell so that we wouldn't have to. That's the unexpected beauty of Jesus' cross.

My sister Emily was an incredible basketball player. She understood the game, she worked hard in practice and her talent shone in competition. Basketball was her passion. But in high school, Em suffered

a terrible injury in a game. She tore an important ligament in her knee, known as the anterior cruciate ligament (or the ACL). It can be a very painful injury, and sometimes it's a career-ender. Em had to have reconstructive surgery. After surgery, she had to wait and wait for her knee to heal, and then she began physical therapy, which was a long road of rehabilitation and recovery. It caused Em to suffer not only physically but also emotionally.

And do you know what Em did? She read Romans chapter 5, verses 3-5. I'll read them again: "Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that 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, who has been given to us."

Em understood what it meant to be stripped of confidence in her own abilities. Her cross hurt, but it also did something else. It got her to change her hope. God knew what he was doing in sending Em her cross, and part of his plan was to fix my sister's eyes on a hope that does not disappoint.

These verses are still very important to my sister. She reads them every day, and she has taken them to heart. Dear friends, let us take these verses to heart! Let's take these words to heart as we continue our walk to the cross with our Savior in this season of Lent. And when God gets to work and sends you suffering, stop. Take a deep breath. Remember Jesus' cross. Remember how he picked up his cross, so that you could pick up yours. With your eyes on Jesus' cross, your feet standing in his grace, and Paul's words imprinted on your heart, pick up your cross. Because the hope you have will not disappoint you. Amen.

Seminarian Daniel Wessel