

Such a Promise

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Bible Text: Genesis 3:14-21

Preached on: Sunday, August 4, 2013

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Some of you will know that it was my privilege to serve as the 192nd meeting of Synod's moderator. Some of you may know that it was my responsibility to lead the devotions on the last day of Synod which would have been Friday and God graciously finished our Synod meeting two sessions earlier than we were supposed to. So, I didn't have to lead devotions at Synod. So, as I wrestled with what I might preach this evening, I decided to take those devotional thoughts and turn them into this evening's sermon though this evening's message has been percolating for quite some time.

I was assigned the title "The Promise of Suffering." A few weeks before I went to Synod, my doctor told me that my PSA levels were a bit high and so I was sent to a urologist and in conversation with the urologist, I was told that he thought it would be good for me to have some biopsies drawn. I thought about that and I asked, "What's the level of pain?" And he said something like this: "After I've drawn the biopsies, you won't think of me as a friend anymore." The promise of suffering was there before me and after I thought about it, I decided, "Well, alright. After all, it's a matter of my health that's at stake and so, alright, I'll submit to your wise counsel." And I can tell you, I am a woose and it hurt a lot.

But I also want to tell you this: it's my contention that such a promise, the promise of suffering, is a gracious promise and one we as Christians should welcome. And each time we realize the reality of such a promise, we should rejoice. Let me help us understand why I believe that's the response that God would have his children have to the promise of suffering. Such a promise.

As I wrestled with where we would turn in Scripture to consider that, I suppose it's because when I became a Christian, I was in the college of the Reformed Presbyterian Church and Jack White was going through a series of messages on the book of Genesis and it seems to me, that everything begins in Genesis and so I would like to direct our attention to Genesis 3. It's a very familiar passage. Genesis 3:14-21. Let's face it, every one of us here who resolve to read through the Bible in a year, at least got through this chapter. It's when you get to Leviticus that you begin to wonder why you made the promise.

Genesis 3, familiar as it is, nevertheless, our Triune God is speaking to us through these verses so let's give attention as he talks.

“The LORD God said to the serpent, ‘Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.’ To the woman he said, ‘I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.’ And to Adam he said, ‘Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, “You shall not eat of it,” cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.’ The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living. And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.”

Indeed, the grass withers and the flower fades but the Word of our God will stand forever. Amen.

What do Benjamin Banneker, Daniel Hale Williams, Archibald Alexander, not the Princetonian theologian, and Percy L. Julian have in common? Some of you probably know. I'll give you a hint: there is a proverb that says, “Necessity is the mother of invention.” Yes, these are inventors. In fact, they're African American inventors. We wouldn't have striking clocks. What's a striking clock? Well, they are those clocks that at 1 o'clock they go bong and at 2 o'clock they go bong, bong and all the way up to 12 at noon and then they start again. That was Benjamin Banneker. The first successful heart operation was done by Daniel Hale Williams. It was Archibald Alexander who designed the Tidal Basin Bridge in Washington, DC and he also designed the Whitehurst Freeway there in DC. How many of us have enjoyed relief from arthritis or painful joints? Well, we can thank Percy L. Julian for he's the one who worked with cortisone in order to make it into the drug that we have today to bring about relief.

My proverb is: “Suffering is the mother of invention.” Suffering is the mother of invention. Why in the world do we suffer? Well, we know the answer to that: we suffer because our first parents, Adam, our federal head, ate the forbidden fruit. And God graciously came and promised suffering. He promised suffering to that federal head of the human race, Adam, because “you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, You shall not eat of it. Cursed is the ground because of you. In pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground.”

Did you hear the promise of suffering? Thank you, Lord, for Dr. Julian. We have cortisone to help us when our joints are inflamed because of the suffering that we experience as we till the ground and serve the creation over which God made us to be vicegerents. Thank you to Dr. Alexander for that Tidal Basin Bridge that enables those in the DC area to go from one shore to the other above the water. And on and on and on we could go listing how suffering in the field of agriculture, in the field of industry, as been the mother of marvelous inventions.

I used to put shingles on a roof and I learned how to feed nails through these two fingers and hammer them in, four to a piece of shingle and how you have a nail gun. Thank God for suffering. I just wished that the hammer hitting the finger, I know, now you have nails through the finger that are driven by air guns. Oh well, thank you for suffering. And there is a whole plethora of medical advances and I link that to the promise that Yahweh Elohim made to the woman: "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children." I had the privilege of observing the birth of four of my children. Women have pain. But we have epidurals now and we've also learned how to do controlled breathing, haven't we? To seek to bring some measure of comfort in spite of the pain.

And because I link birth to hospitals, I link it to the medical arena and just think of the number of medicines that have been invented to curb suffering. How many disease are there that we no longer fear? Because God promised our first mother, "You're going to have pain when you have children." And the medical arena rallied around those women to try to help them not have as much pain. And the medical arena rallied around us and our illnesses and we praise God, don't we? For the measure of health that we enjoy and we almost expect to enjoy, long into our lives.

Yahweh Elohim promised suffering physically and medically and humankind rose to the challenge. But what about suffering brought on through bad morals? What about suffering that inflicts us because of sin? We don't like to talk about bad morals as being sin because in our society we want to define what good and bad morals are. Some who are against beverage alcohol might have rejoiced when you heard that there are bartenders and tavern owners who are pouring Russian vodka out on the streets in Pittsburgh until you find out why they're doing it. They're not doing it as a protest against drunkenness, they're doing it because in Russia you're not allowed to marry homosexually. They are doing it because in Russia, there are laws against people being demonstratively homosexual. And I wonder if we're going to be supporters of Putin in the Winter Olympics when the Russian police track down on any who are there at the Winter Olympics practicing their homosexuality? We decry abortions. The human solution to unwanted pregnancies. After all, why should she suffer twice for a crime perpetrated on her, or for "a mistake."

Praise God for the promise of Genesis 3:15 because there in Genesis 3:15, O such a promise, that entails the promise of suffering. We have, indeed, God's solution for bad morals, God's solution for sin. The protoevangelium. When I taught Bible in Colorado

Springs, if you had me as a Bible teacher, any essay question in which you could work Genesis 3:15, you got extra credit. If you wrote Genesis 3:15 somewhere on a test paper, you got extra credit. Why? Because there is the answer to bad morals and why we suffer and how we're to suffer when someone mistreats us or we find ourselves in sin. And God said to the serpent, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."

The path of Jesus Christ was a path of pain. The path of Jesus Christ was a path of suffering. The path of the church of Jesus Christ, the woman, is a path of suffering. Every step of the way it ought not to surprise us that someone is nipping at our heel to impede our progress just as the devil nipped at our first parents' heels and set them off the path on which God would have them walk. And how did he do it? "Don't you want to be like God? If you do, eat the fruit he told you not to eat." What had they forgotten? "You're my image-bearers," he told them when he made them. "You already are like me and in being like me, you will love me and we will have these cool talks in the cool of the day in the Garden, day by day by day." But what happened? One day, as the Lord God came into the Garden, Adam and Eve weren't to be found. Where were they? You know the story as well as I do. They had made for themselves clothing and they were hiding behind a tree. Why? Because they saw one another's nakedness and they were ashamed. They were no longer able to be open and free with one another because they had eaten the forbidden fruit. And they certainly didn't want to see God because they know they broke fellowship with him. And what does God do? The all-seeing God says, "Where are you?" "We're hiding over here because we saw we were naked and we were afraid." They had reason to be afraid, didn't they? What did God promise? Eat the forbidden fruit and you'll die. Sin and the wages of sin is death.

Then God does something so gracious, so merciful. "Who told you you were naked? And why did you eat of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Yahweh Elohim would have loved to have heard Adam own up. All Adam had to do was say, "I sinned. O Father, forgive me!" Now you know why when we get caught with our hand in the cookie jar, we don't confess. "I didn't put it there, the woman you gave me did. I didn't behave that way, I was made to behave that way. I didn't break your commandments, I was forced to do it. If they hadn't, I wouldn't have."

So, what did the Lord God do? Well, we fast-forward, don't we? To that couple engaged to be married and Joseph learns that his fiancée is pregnant. He wants to do the honorable thing. The Holy Spirit, through an angel of the Lord...guys, if you were Joseph, think about it: your fiancée is pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Excuse me? Say that again? "Your fiancée is the mother of my beloved Son. That seed of the woman that I promised was going to come all the way back there when Adam and Eve ate that forbidden fruit. And instead of executing justice upon them and striking them from the face of this earth, my Son and the Holy Spirit and I, the Father, says, determined, that Jesus will be the suffering servant. And he will come to this earth and he will walk every step that he walks in complete and total obedience to my word. In fact, for 40 days he'll be in the

wilderness without food and you know what will sustain him? The Bible. The Bible. It was his bread as that serpent wanted to get him.”

But you see, the Scriptures tell us that even the Son learned obedience through the things he suffered. My wife said she’s tired of the illustration I use all the time about speeding. So, I came up with another one: I remember vividly the day that my second son fell into the pool before he knew how to swim. How many of you have been told by your parents, “Don’t go near the edge of the pool because you don’t know how to swim.” Don’t put your hand up if you’re one of the ones that didn’t obey and fell in and almost drowned. I thank God I was there and to grab Joshua and pick him up and say, “I wish you would have listened to me. I’m glad I’m here to help you.”

Often it’s through the things that we suffer that we learn obedience. But what did Jesus suffer? What did Jesus suffer? His mother and his brothers and sisters thought he was a lunatic. Have you ever been called crazy for Jesus? When did he suffer the most? There he was on the cross, “He saved others, let’s see if he can save himself.” But that issue was settled, wasn’t it? It was settled the night before because there was Jesus in that garden that we call Gethsemane and he knew what was going to happen. For no sin of his own, he would be forsaken by his Father. For no sin of his own, he would hang on that cursed cross. For no sin of his own, he would cry out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In fact, it was for the sin of his own people. First of all, his own people, his Jewish heritage said, “Crucify him!”

But it was also because of their sin that he took upon himself and died the death they deserved to die. We know from Hebrews 12, “For the joy set before him he endured the cross.” He became sin who knew no sin and suffered because of sin. Should we expect anything less? When we sin, should we expect to suffer? Amen. When we do good, should we expect to suffer? Amen. Why? Well, aren’t we told by Paul in the letter that he wrote to the Philippians 1:29, “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should suffer for righteousness’ sake. For it is better to suffer for doing good if it is the will of God than for doing evil. For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the Spirit.” Do you remember Joseph? Sold as a slave by his brothers? Suffered, it seems, mercilessly but at the end of the story, “As for you, you meant it for evil against me, but God meant it for good to bring it about that many people should be kept alive as they are today.”

When Paul wrote his second letter to the Corinthians. he said a remarkable thing. Remember Corinthians? I don’t know a pastor alive who would say, “Send me to that church.” Right? Corinthians were notorious for their divisions, for open sin. Not even the pagans committed that sin and welcomed it. They did it. Second letter, verses 3-7,

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share

abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.”

What is our comfort? Our comfort is to know that we are secure in the bosom of our Father who loved us and sent his Son to die for us. Our comfort is secure in knowing that the Holy Spirit is alive and well within us. And when we don't quench him, we will rejoice when we're called upon by God to suffer. To suffer. To suffer. And when we recognize that our comfort rests in Jesus Christ and all that he's done for us, we will be able to comfort others who are suffering so that they may live and I'm thinking of the numbers of people who suffer either because they've sinned or because they did good and at the end of the day, instead of finding in Jesus Christ the only comfort for their suffering, they begin to cast disparaging words about the perpetrators who caused them to suffer and a root of bitterness begins to well up and the joy of salvation begins to be sapped and drained and when we saddle up next and we put our arm around and we say, “Oh, let's pity the other.” We're not saving a life, we're causing a life to be spent in despair.

And if I find in my life my ultimate self-worth and self-esteem in anything other than a saving relationship with Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father through him and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit in me, my jealous Savior will not allow rivals in my life and he will strip that false idol god means of salvation and comfort esteem and calling right out of me. And it's at that moment I need to call out to God, “Praise be to you for loving me so much that you will strip from me anything or anyone that comes between my total resolve to do your will and your will alone, unto death.”

That's our Jesus and that's our life in our Jesus. That's a promise that awaits us when we sign on to Jesus Christ. If there's anyone here this evening who is still hiding behind fabrications of your own, to prevent you from displaying the shame you have because of the sin that's in you, call out to Jesus, “God, be merciful to me a sinner. I don't want these leaves any longer. Chop the tree down. Get me out of here! I've had it. I'm tired of suffering in my own strength. Help me appreciate that my strength is only made perfect when I am weak and bow before the cross that I might sit in the seat of glory with Jesus Christ now because of the forgiveness of my sins that I now enjoy and O, how I look forward to the day that I'm called into that heavenly rest.” They'll be no longer any suffering but now we count it all joy when we suffer for him who suffered for us, that seed of the woman who walked through life with a bruised heel but as he stayed on that cross, he crushed the head of the serpent and has bound him these thousand years so that we'll no longer be deceived if we trust in the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. And, O such a promise, the promise of suffering that when we taste it, by the grace of God, we may rejoice. Why? He foreknew us, he predestined us, that we would be conformed to the image of his beloved Son. Jesus is the one who learned obedience through suffering. Praise be to God that as we're conformed to his image, it will be

through suffering. It doesn't take the pain of suffering away, but it makes the joy of salvation all the more enjoyable.

And so, in Psalm 107, the Psalmist is moved by the Holy Spirit to write a Psalm that, perhaps, the bumper sticker that says, "Too blessed to complain." For in Psalm 107, the Psalmist is calling those who are ungrateful to remember all the goodness and the wonders of God that he's demonstrated toward us in that while we were yet dead in our trespasses and sin, while we were blaspheming and shaking our fists, he loved us and he shed his blood for us so that we might enjoy life and enjoy it abundantly in the path to eternity, to everlasting life in the new heavens and the new earth, that is spent in this life mortifying the sins that linger in the old man who still hasn't had rigor mortis set in.

Let's pray.

Father in heaven, such a promise. We wince when we're promised suffering but we know natural examples of how suffering is, indeed, for our good. Help us to appreciate that when it comes to morals and being sinned against and sinning. Help us to find in Jesus that ability that he extends to us, "I forgive you though you nailed me to the cross." Help us, our Father, to forgive as we have been forgiven and to spend our lives offering the comfort with which you have comforted us to those who are afflicted. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.