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Companion for the Journey

Renewed in Mercy

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR A

The psalms often provide us with an excellent map for planning worship. In a world where we struggle to acknowledge our emotions as individuals, much less as a community, the psalms are master classes in how to faithfully express our emotions and experiences to God as a gathered body.

REFERENCES

Exodus 17:1-7

Psalm 95

Romans 5:1-11

John 4:5-42

COLORS

Purple

Does Paul have a different understanding of “boast” than we do? He must, or else some of these words just don’t make sense. “Boast in our sufferings.” What is that about? Is he talking about those folks who insist on showing you their scars, even when it makes you a little queasy? “TMI,” we claim, turning away from the exposed flesh. Is he asking us to make noise about the struggles we’ve had? No one likes that, do they? I know he goes on to talk about the value of suffering. Or maybe the result of suffering or the product of suffering. That’s clear. But still, boasting about the suffering seems excessive.

Funnily enough, the Greek word here might offer some help. The word translated as *boast* in this text is *kauchaomai*, which has both negative and positive connotations. The bad sense is what we are most familiar with – self-glorifying or taking pride in oneself. That’s the kind of boasting

we're used to. We see it in front of us all too often. We live in a culture that often glorifies the self in various ways. It's a temptation for many of us, if we're honest. It grates against our understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ. Yet, here is Paul calling us to boast. What's up with that?

Well, there is a positive side to *kauchaomai* that might fit us a little better here. The word calls us to have confidence in God; we might translate it as "rejoice in" or "glory in." If you scroll through various English translations, you'll find all sorts of manifestations of this word. So, we're all a little uncomfortable with boasting, it seems.

But what is Paul asking of us? There are several ways to interpret this directive. However, he might be trying to remind us that we are not alone on this journey of faith or journey through life. We are not alone. It seems simple, yet it is terribly profound and frighteningly countercultural. We live in an individualizing and isolating culture. To emphasize companions on the journey is to stand against the push to focus on the individual. Our faith is a shared faith. It has been from the beginning. Paul asks us to acknowledge that partnership.

Even in our suffering. That feels like a stretch, I know. For one thing, we prefer to suffer in isolation. It is hard to imagine the results Paul describes by being alone. Endurance, perhaps, but character and hope are relational. Yes, there is an individual component, but the real test of character is how we interact with others. The real impact of hope is to build community, to deepen relationships.

Paul reminds us, above all, that God is present in our suffering. Hope, he argues, is the sign of God being poured into our hearts. All along the way, God is with us. Thus, the boasting, or the glorying in or rejoicing, is a result of that presence. That's where the glory comes from—not from us, but from God poured into our hearts.

The writer of Psalm 95 calls us to know this same joy, this same glory. We sing and we rejoice because we know that God is present. God is seen in the world that surrounds us, claims the psalmist. And who would argue? The psalm concludes (except for the final warning) with a call to an intimate relationship with this God who permeates all of creation. We belong to this God; we are the people of the pasture, evoking images of security and restoration. We are the sheep of God's hand. People in a pasture and sheep in the hand? Maybe it's odd, but it speaks to the deepest longings of our hearts, to be loved and claimed and held and sustained.

Don't harden your hearts, the psalmist pleads; don't test God or you'll be cut off. You'll miss out on this blessing and a hope. Paul talks about this hardening in a different way. While we were

enemies, we were reconciled. God reaches past the hardening of our hearts to gather us up and bring us back into right relationship with God. We were saved from being cut off, from the anger of God, by the redemption of Christ. That brings us back to boasting. We boast not in our accomplishments, but in this gift that came from the death and resurrection of Jesus. That is a boast, a rejoicing, worthy of each and all of us.

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