

A VERY PRESENT HELP

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Psalm 46:1-7; Romans 5:1-8

“...hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

— Romans 5:5

In recent days, we’ve been commemorating the 75th anniversary of the Normandy Invasion. Only a handful of the heroes who participated in that epic event are still with us.

One who’s not is a man I knew slightly. He grew up in Point Pleasant Beach, New Jersey — the town where I used to serve. But I knew him because, after the war, he settled in my hometown of Toms River. There he lived out a very long life, raising a family and practicing law.

Like many World War 2 veterans, Leonard “Bud” Lomell didn’t have a lot to say about his wartime experiences. But the world wouldn’t leave him alone: because he was a bona fide war hero.

The historian Stephen Ambrose has said that, with the exception of General Eisenhower, then-First Sergeant “Bud” Lomell was the single individual most responsible for the success of D-Day.

In the early hours of the invasion, his unit of Army Rangers landed at the foot of some sheer cliffs adjacent to Utah Beach, a place known as Pointe du Hoc. They quietly scaled the cliff with ropes, without being noticed by the German

defenders — who figured no one could possibly climb those cliffs.

Their objective was five large artillery pieces that pretty much controlled Utah Beach. If those cannons were operational a few hours later, when the first wave of invaders was scheduled to hit the beach, the carnage would have been unbelievable.

Sergeant Lomell and his men found no cannons where they were supposed to be: only some telephone poles the Germans had set up as decoys, to fool the Allied reconnaissance aircraft into thinking they were gun barrels. Moving inland, they found the real guns hidden in an apple orchard, covered by camouflage netting. About two hundred German soldiers were nearby, receiving orders from their officers. No one was defending the guns.

Bud ran up to the artillery emplacement himself and destroyed the gunsights by bashing them with the butt of his rifle. Then, he used thermite grenades to melt the firing mechanism. He performed this sabotage without the Germans noticing. By the time the Allied soldiers hit the beach, the guns of Pointe du Hoc were useless.

We all like success stories; and Bud Lomell's is a fine example. He was a courageous and resourceful man — but he was also a very, very lucky one. Lots of other courageous men died alone on the beach that day, in agony. *They* never

got to talk to the Rotary Club. **They** never lived to see their children and grandchildren.

Anybody who's seen the film, *Saving Private Ryan*, has a small sense of what those courageous G.I.s went through. The opening scene of that movie has been called the most gritty and realistic combat scene ever filmed. It's not noble, it's not glorious, it's not even particularly organized; it's fifteen minutes or so of sheer terror and noise and confusion.

There's one horrifying vignette of an Army medic on the beach, trying desperately to save the life of a wounded soldier, as bullets whiz by all around. The medic is tying a tourniquet, and as he's doing so he's pleading with the young man to hang on, to trust him, to just relax and he'll save his life. Just as the medic's about to succeed in doing that, there's an odd popping sound, and he realizes, to his horror, that a bullet has just pierced the young man's helmet, killing him instantly. All his labors and struggles of the last few minutes to save the young man's life — at the risk of his own — have been for naught. I can think of no image from modern cinema that captures the sheer futility of war better than that one.

There's one thing you can say about the suffering portrayed in *Saving Private Ryan*: one thing that redeems it. The suffering of those soldiers on the beach is for a worthy cause. There's an abiding sense, throughout the movie, that

all the suffering is not in vain. It is for a purpose. Those men bled and died for freedom.

Would that we could say the same thing about all human experiences of suffering! Some people are just plain unlucky. They get sick and die before their time. Or, they live in a land like Guatemala, where armed gangs terrorize the population. Or, they're displaced people in the vast refugee camps of the Middle East. There are people who were born in those camps and have lived there for decades: with only the faintest hope of ever seeing the world outside the fence. You'd be hard-pressed to say that any of those experiences of suffering are for a purpose.

In the passage from Romans 5 I read for you, Paul addresses precisely this type of suffering: the sort of suffering that just is, and isn't redeemed by any apparent purpose. **“Suffering produces endurance,”** he says, **“and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.”**

Sounds like a neatly-bundled theological package, doesn't it? Maybe a little too tightly bundled. Step one, step two, step three — step right through your sufferings, Paul seems to be saying, and you'll come out, at the end, to hope. The tunnel may be dark — yea, verily, black as pitch — but at the end of it, there's bright, beaming sunlight. Suffering may be hard, when you're in the thick of it, but

it will make you a better person in the end.

Well, isn't that just peachy? Maybe we ought to read this passage to people in hospital beds.... to wives who cower in fear of abusive husbands.... to single parents lined up for food stamps.

I don't think I would have the audacity to read Romans 5:1-5 to a patient critically ill in a hospital bed. Maybe if I were in the adjoining bed, critically ill myself, I could read it: but not when I'm standing there, healthy. It comes across just a little too glib, a little too sugar-coated: "*Buck up, now -- because, you know, every cloud has a silver lining!*" Yeah, right.

There *are* passages I do read to people in hospital rooms, when it seems they're open to hearing God's word. One of them is Psalm 46 — we heard a goodly portion of it as our First Reading today:

**God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its
tumult.**

We got a lot of mileage out of that psalm down on the Jersey Shore, in the days following Hurricane Sandy. "We will not fear, though the earth should change": you know, we did see the earth change down at Mantoloking, as the ocean cut through the barrier beach, as the waters roared and foamed.

Notice the author of this psalm doesn't minimize the chaos and confusion that is suffering. In his poetic vision, the earth is being transformed.... the very mountains are shaking.... the waters of the sea are a roiling mass of confusion and terror. There's no attempt to sugar-coat *this* reality.

Contrast to that the peaceful, orderly image of the next verses:

**There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.**

The city, of course, is Jerusalem. The river flows, according to Jewish legend, from the city's very heart on the heights of Mount Zion, toward each of the four directions: north, south, east and west. Everything in the holy city is balanced, symmetrical, orderly. **"God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved."**

What separates this psalm from just any old patriotic anthem is the setting in which it was originally sung. The book of Psalms, as you probably know, is the hymnbook of ancient Israel. Many of these songs were sung in the Temple in Jerusalem. What you may not know is precisely *when* this collection of hymns was put together — what was going on as the decisions were made which hymns to include and which to leave out.

The book of Psalms was assembled at the time of the Babylonian Exile — when the priests and musicians and poets (and yes, even the princes) were living

in the ancient equivalent of a refugee camp. The Babylonian army has come along and practiced its own version of ethnic cleansing. The Babylonians haven't deported *all* the people — just the ones who mattered, from their point of view: the ones who could challenge their authority as conquerors.

So what do these exiles do, to while away the hours in their refugee camp? Why, they compose and edit a book of hymns. The words of some of these hymns are positively audacious, considering their circumstances — **“God is in the midst of the city, it shall not be moved”** is plainly untrue, based on their recent experience. But still, these are the hymns they choose to write down, and preserve for generations yet to come.

Here are a couple verses from the part of Psalm 46 we didn't hear today:

**“Come, behold the works of the Lord;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.”**

Some of these words from the book of Psalms we are still waiting to see come true. They were no more true on the beaches of Normandy than they are today, as we hear disturbing reports of saber-rattling in the Persian Gulf.

Yet one part of Psalm 46 *does* ring true: **“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”**

The writer of this psalm pulls no punches in describing the cataclysm of rumbling mountains and roaring seas, but of one thing he is certain: God is in the midst not only of the orderly city, but also of the city in turmoil, the city being shaken to its foundations. The people of Judah are certainly suffering as they languish in exile — but if they look carefully, the psalmist is saying, they will see God walking into exile beside them. The Army medic on Omaha Beach may curse in frustration as the soldier he’s caring for is shot dead — but lying there on the beach beside him is God, and God, too, has a hole in the helmet. The disciples may cry out in rage and despair as their rabbi is hung on a cross to die — but they scarcely realize, as their eyes take in that grim scene, that it is not just Jesus of Nazareth who is hanging on that cross, but Jesus, Son of God.

“Hope,” says Paul, “does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

This, my friends, is an image of abundance — abundance in the midst of utter desolation. *This* is why Paul can talk so glibly of **“suffering producing endurance, and endurance producing character, and character producing hope.”**

Paul can speak with such confidence because he has already seen, in his own life, the love of God poured out in such abundance that it overflows. Paul

doesn't speak of suffering as one who has never known it; rather, he speaks as one with scars on his soul — one who has known not only persecutions but also what it feels like to be a persecutor himself, and to repent of that evil.

“I know what it is,” he writes soberly to the Philippians, **“to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.”**

Then — and only then — does Paul goes on to add these well-loved, concluding words: **“I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”**

[Philippians 4:12-13] Paul can make that claim because he has had the experience of casting his body off a spiritual cliff, and finding God's arms were there to catch him.

There's an old story of a sailing ship, that was plying the waters of the Atlantic. The voyage had been long and hard, and the ship's supplies were nearly exhausted. The crew had been becalmed for weeks in brutally hot weather. The sailors were at the end of their water-rations. The wind had since picked up: but still, land was nowhere to be seen.

Just as it seemed there was no more hope, the lookout spied a distant sail, growing larger by the minute. In a short time, the other ship drew alongside.

The captain of the first ship signaled a desperate message: **“Please, give us some water.”**

The terse message came back from the second ship: **“Let down your buckets.”**

The advice sounded crazy — for who can drink the water of the ocean? But the captain did so, anyway. He and his crew discovered to their amazement that the water in their buckets was fresh!

The ship was traveling, by that time, off the coast of Brazil. The captain and crew were still miles out to sea, but they happened — unbeknownst to them — to be sitting right at the mouth of the mighty Amazon, largest river in the world. They couldn’t even see the land from the deck of their ship, but the vast flow of fresh water surging forth from the land reached them, even where they were.

The story of the thirsty sailors is a little parable for us — for those spiritual dry times, when you or I may fear that suffering has the power to overwhelm us. The message Paul learned so painfully in his own life — and the message the Jews in Babylon learned, as well — is that through it all, God is faithful.

There are times, in my ministry, that I wish I could reach into my pocket and dispense a magical pill that would make everything all right. Yet I’ve been supplied with no such medication, no miracle drug. All I’ve got is the ability to tell

stories: strange and remarkable tales of a God who suffers and dies (and rises again), a God who is “**a very present help in trouble.**”

The great reformer Martin Luther, at a time in his life when the Reformation was going badly and he despaired of his own life, turned to Psalm 46 for comfort. He found such powerful assurance there that he wrote a hymn inspired by its words. “God is our refuge and strength” evokes the image of a mighty fortress, its bulwark never failing.

We’ll sing that great hymn at the end of the worship service: and as you sing it, I hope you’ll notice that it in no way soft-pedals human suffering, nor explains it away. Some battles in life are long and hard: but we have the assurance, from scripture, that there is one who must win the battle: none other than Jesus Christ, who once hung upon the cross, but has now left it empty, a sign of his triumph.

His cross remains: a reminder that there is no suffering you or I may encounter that he does not go there with us, to comfort and console and strengthen.

For our closing prayer today, we use some famous words of St. Augustine:

**O God, to be turned from you is to fall,
to be turned to you is to rise,
to stand in you is to abide forever.
Grant us in all our duties your help,
in all our perplexities your guidance,**

**in all our dangers your protection,
and in all our sorrows your peace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

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