

The Time of Our Life

Romans 5:1-8

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Charles Dickens opens his novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, with the now famous line:

“It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.”

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way – in short, the period was so far like the present period (he could have been writing in 2020), that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.¹

It was the best of times – 2020 – we have discovered the cure for so many diseases

It was the worst of times – the COVID-19 pandemic

It was the best to times – we had more channels on TV and more streaming services and more access to news and information than ever before.

It was the worst of times – we were stuck at home with those channels and streaming services and Google searches.

It was the best of times – we had a granddaughter who turned one.

It was the worst of times – because of COVID we were unable to go and visit

It was the best of times – electric cars, passenger jet service around the world, astronauts going to and from the ISS, we had put men on the moon.

It was the worst of times – we couldn’t travel to any country, not even the US.

And so it is. This is how we experience 2020 and this is how it will be remembered. And we have no idea when it will all end. The best of times and the worst of times, not necessarily in world history but in our history. Increasingly, I think, we are asking ourselves, how will me

¹ Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (New York: New American Library, nd), 13.

make it through this time and what if, as some have suggested, we get another wave in fall and, maybe, the novel coronavirus and its disease, COVID-19 is here to stay? What then?

Reminding ourselves that there have been other bad times in history somehow doesn't quite cut it. Sure, the 20th century had WW I, the stock market crash, the Dustbowl and Depression of the 30s, WW II, the Korean War, the Cold War, and, for our American friends, Vietnam. For African Americans there were the Jim Crow laws and the civil rights movement and its suffering in the 60s. Sure, all that is true, and that and worse—the Black Death, massacres, etc.—throughout history. But finally, we did not have to live through those. We have no intention of minimizing those. However, no matter how many bad times there were in the past, we—you and I—still have to figure out how to live through this time.

It was within this context that I read our lectionary texts for this week and discovered the Romans text, the one we heard earlier. I noted the word “suffering” and thought it might be a text that could speak to our questions about living in the best of times and the worst of times. I knew I have preached on this text before, at least when I did a series on Romans 1-8. I could have gone back to see what the text said to me and my congregation back then but I thought, “Why?” We are not living back then, in 2004 and 2013. I wanted to know what it might have to say in 2020. I did not want to know what it had to say to the Mennonites at Zion in 2004 or the Mennonites in Wymark in 2013. I wanted to know what it had to say to me and my United Church friends in 2020. I didn't even want to know what it said to me in 2004 or 2013 because I went through a major event in my life in 2015, causing me to look at and experience life in some significantly different ways. So, this would have to be a new conversation with the text.

You know how it sometimes happens to you that you watch a movie on Netflix or recorded on your PVR and suddenly you stop it and say, “What was that?” You rewind and listen

and/or watch again to see if you really caught what was being said and shown. Or, in a conversation someone says something and maybe you are not paying close enough attention and suddenly it's like "What, what did you say?" Or you're reading a book and the same thing happens because it's like the plot or conversation in the story take a bizarre twist. Our Romans text did that to me in two ways, and I noticed stuff I had not necessarily seen before, stuff really important and really important to this business of living at the best of times and the worst of times in 2020.

Let's start with the second (lots of people think me backwards). I had seen in the past that vs. 3 suggested we "boast in our suffering." Knowing Paul of Tarsus could get quite boastful, it did not seem so strange: "Look at me. See how tough I am. I can handle anything." Then I read the NLT and it said "rejoice." However, I checked and the Greek word was to the word used when the missionary preacher told the people in Philippi to "Rejoice always." So, skip the rejoicing in suffering. Who would want to do that? Then I went to Eugene Peterson's *The Message*. When working with texts I usually check these three translations: NRSV, NLT, and *The Message*. Peterson had Paul saying that "even when we are hemmed in with troubles," "we continue to shout our praise." Okay, I understood that. In tough times we can still praise God, in some general way. However, then I dug a little deeper and what I discovered was that the best translation for this word in the letter was "celebrate." Whoa. Celebrate. We celebrate in our suffering. That stopped me.

Before 2015, I might have skipped over that finding or said something pious like "well, all things work together for them who love God." It would have sounded nice but I could not have given it lots of heart. I might even have said: "Let's just stick with boast." However, now as I read this in light of two things—my chemo journey in 2015 and what I wrote about it in 2019—

I mulled over “celebrate” and I thought, “Okay, maybe that makes sense.” Now, less you think I’ve lost it and I am going to tell you that you should celebrate suffering, let me explain.

Well before my chemo journey was done, I realized how much I was happening to my character and spirituality. I was thankful that this good was happening. As I left chemo behind me and began to feel better, I continued to be thankful for all the good that had happened to me. However, I still hated my chemo time and its memories, some of which can trigger me even today, as when I pull into the hospital parking lot or see the Pasqua Hospital in the TV news and notice the sign that reads: “Alan Blair Cancer Centre.” And then, in 2019 as I was working on Trail Post #6 in my book I realized I could write: “Thank you that I had cancer and went through chemo.” I was thankful because I knew that if I had not had that experience, I would not be who I am today and would have much less to contribute and be much less of a person. I can “celebrate” my very tough year, though with a kind of subdued emotion. No dancing.

It is from here that I went back to the first thing that had caught my eye. When I first picked this text, I was focused on suffering leads to endurance and endurance to character and character to hope. However, that line-up still left me with the question: “How? How does this happen?” It’s then that I noticed vs. 1. Verse 1 tells us that we are justified by faith. In the past I had not paid a lot of attention to that. All this justification stuff and faith and salvation, well, we United Church and Mennonite do-gooders tend to shy away and go to verses that tell us to feed the hungry and to love each other. However, this time I had a new sense of what this text was trying to say.

We have tended to hear “justified” as a forensic term and “faith” as a “believe-certain-things” word. Believe the right things and you will no longer be guilty and God won’t dam you to hell. I realized now this was not at all what it meant. For starters, “justified” is NOT a forensic

word. It, and its English partner, righteousness, translating the same Greek word, is a relationship word. It is used to label a relationship that has been restored. And “faith” is not a “believe-certain-things” word. It is also a relationship word. It means trusting someone. So, this text was not telling us that because we believe certain things God will not dam us to punishment. What the text was telling us is that whatever barriers there were or we thought there were between us and God are gone. They do not exist. We have been reconciled. We are friends with God. God loves us and we can love God. We have no reason ever again to fear God. Feeling guilty> God has forgiven. Feeling shame? God accepts you without question. Feeling far from God? God is reaching out and pulling you close. Feeling afraid of God? God loves you unconditionally. There is nothing you can do to have God love you more and there is nothing you can do to have God love you less. That is being justified.

And so, trust that. Trust God. It’s as simple as that. Trust God. Feel God’s love and begin to feel your love for God. During my chemo journey there came the time when for the first time in my life I could honestly say: “I love you, God” in response to the love from God that I felt. I felt it in the same way I feel, in my body, my chest area, the love Sylvia and I have for each other or the love I have for our granddaughter when I think of her or see her on Facetime. It is because of this experience with God and the sense of God as Present, Loving, and Caring that I can now celebrate the tough times I went through.

The invitation to us is to experience our 2020 “best of times/worst of times” in the same way. When we can live with a real, live sense of God as Presence, Love and Caring, then we can live with hope. Not a shallow optimism, not an “everything happens for a reason,” not an “everything will be fine,” but a sense that we are loved by God and in God’s care and therefore it is okay.