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What Is Our Only Comfort?

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Romans 8:22-39

Maybe this is your first time worshipping in the sanctuary since early 2020 – or perhaps it’s the first time ever. Maybe you’ve been coming in person since we carefully began re-opening months ago – or maybe you’re online.

However you’re joining us this morning, *welcome*. Together with followers of Jesus everywhere, we are the church, the body of Christ in the world.

The isolation of the last year and a half has been disruptive, to say the least. We’ve lost touch with one another. We’ve missed milestones – graduations, births, deaths, marriages, divorces, relocations, job changes. We look different: greyer hair, a beard that wasn’t there before; maybe we’ve gone bald, or we’re pregnant or new parents. We have some things in our lives that helped us through these long months: new recipes, a bunch of good books, a few dozen Netflix films and jigsaw puzzles, some quiet walking places, the joy of a hand-written note – and maybe a new pet – did anyone *not* get a Covid dog?

Most of us have managed, one way or another, to survive, and that is enough. We should not be too hard on ourselves that we did not achieve everything – or even *anything* – on that list of self-improvement goals we set for ourselves during the pandemic.

And, of course, it's not over. Far from it. In some areas Covid infection rates have climbed to levels not seen since last year. Hospitalizations and deaths from Covid among those unvaccinated and unmasked are surging across the country.

The other pandemics have not left us, either: racial injustice and social disparities, political animosities, and national fracturing – that's all still here.

With what has happened over the last 18 months to us and our community and nation, and to the earth, if we feel disoriented and undone, it's because *we are* – and that may not be such a bad thing. We probably needed some deconstructing, a re-resetting of priorities that had skewed in the wrong direction, a re-discovery of abandoned values.

Many of us had been speeding along through life as if all were well, but the pandemic forced us to slow down and see things, and ourselves, in new light. The nation's reckoning with racism and our polarized culture have reminded us that all is not well in the land.

fter the flu pandemic of 1918, which was at least as bad as Covid, the nation lurched quickly forward and went roaring into the 1920s, hardly pausing to look back or learn from the awful experience. Let us not repeat that mistake. I don't mean we should dwell forever on the sorrow of lives lost – 660,000 and counting – but we would be helped by reflecting on what we have been through together, and what we are still going through – on what we are learning about ourselves and our world.

The isolation and suffering – as difficult as they have been – may have helped us. Grief can be like that. The end of a relationship can be like that. A lost job or a foreclosed house or a business bankruptcy or a severe illness can be like that. They can break us open and help us see what truly matters.

The essentials become essential again.

Yesterday morning, I stood with others outside on the church's Upper Plaza listening to the Westminster Bells. They rang at 9am for four minutes to remember and honor those who died when our nation was attacked on September 11, 2001. I looked around the Plaza at the church members and strangers and unhoused neighbors listening and was reminded of what happened in America in that moment 20 years ago. We were devastated. We were broken, *and yet* we were bound together. We belonged to one another.

For people of faith, crises like 9/11 or the pandemic or injustice or climate change raise profound spiritual questions about who we are and what we are doing, about meaning and purpose, about life in community, about the nature of resilience and hope.

“Hope that is seen,” the Apostle Paul says, “Is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?” (Romans 8:24)

We couldn't see it as we listened to the bells yesterday, or in those first days after 9/11, or during the worst of the pandemic, but it was there. We may have trouble finding it in our nation's unending struggle for “liberty and justice for all,” but it is there. We carry hope in our hearts, and it emerges when we get to the place where we discover again that we belong to one another, and that there is no future for *all* if *some* are forgotten or left out.

In other times of enormous disruption and chaos, people have faced similar predicaments. Five hundred years ago in Europe was not all that different from today in some ways. Old traditions were being overthrown and the world turned upside down. Empires were falling. Nations clashing. Religious violence breaking out. A so-called “New World” appearing, even as it was being colonized and dismantled.

In the mid-16th century drought devastated Europe. People experienced some of the coldest winters ever remembered. Earthquakes flattened whole towns. Epidemics raged through cities. In the year 1563 alone, 20,000 people died in London from the plague, and another 300,000 died from it in German towns.

([HTTPS://QUOD.LIB.UMICH.EDU/E/EVANS/N27531.0001.001/1:10?RGN=DIV1;VIEW=FULLTEXT](https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N27531.0001.001/1:10?RGN=DIV1;VIEW=FULLTEXT))

In that same year, amid all that upheaval, reformed Protestants – Presbyterians like us – in Heidelberg, Germany, adopted a new Catechism. A catechism is a series of questions and responses that teach Christian faith. The questions in Heidelberg in 1563 were aimed especially at young people, but in that time and in the centuries that followed, they served as a guide through spiritual and existential crises for many.

The opening question of the catechism cuts to heart of the matter, then and now:

What is your only comfort, in life and in death?

That's how they chose in their time of turmoil to begin to teach the faith that sustained them when all else seemed to be falling apart. At this moment in our lives and our community, in our nation and world, that may be among the most important questions we can ask ourselves:

What is our only comfort, in life and in death?

The response in Heidelberg was simple, and clear:

“That I belong – body and soul, in life and in death – not to myself but to my faithful savior Jesus Christ.”

Our forebears in the faith saw their familiar world slipping away – but for them, that time of crisis was a moment for spiritual transformation:

“By his Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ...assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.”

The Spirit gives us what we need, from now on – from this day forward – *to live for Jesus Christ*, and it begins with remembering that *we belong to God*. In *body* and soul. In every type of body: immigrant bodies, impoverished bodies, black bodies, beaten bodies, trans bodies, bodies with differing abilities – in body and soul, *we belong* not to ourselves, but to our faithful savior Jesus Christ.

In all the commotion and mayhem and uncertainty there’s a lifeline that takes us to the place where we find hope, and it is simply this: *we belong*.

“Human beings,” scholar David Whyte says, “Are creatures of belonging, though they may come to that sense of belonging only through long periods of exile and loneliness.”

(<https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/03/11/david-whyte-three-marriages-work-life/>)

The Apostle Paul says basically the same thing: even when the whole creation is groaning, and we ourselves are groaning, and the world seems confusing and, perhaps terrifying, we remain convinced of at least this one thing: *nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

However we may experience and know and name that love, it cannot be taken from us – and by its power we belong to one another.

Some of you may have seen the story earlier this summer about the Israeli woman who decided to donate a kidney to a stranger to celebrate her 50th birthday. She remembered that her grandfather, a Holocaust survivor, had encouraged her to “live meaningfully,” and never to forget the Jewish tradition that says, “There is no higher duty than saving a life.”

Her family was against the idea of her donating a kidney. When it turned out the selected recipient was a three-year-old Palestinian boy from Gaza, she kept that detail secret, knowing how strenuously her family would

object. Relatives of the woman's husband had been killed in Palestinian attacks, and the boy's home had been destroyed by an Israeli bomb.

There were all kinds of reasons not to do this. But still, she said, "It was the right thing to do."

The night before surgery she told her father the recipient was a Palestinian boy from Gaza. In silence he began weeping. "Well," he finally said through tears, "He needs life, too."

(<https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-health-religion-israel-b3563e5b2fb2cdec21b779adecd9497>)

The Palestinian father of the boy from Gaza, in turn, donated a kidney that went to a 25-year-old Israeli mother. Two lives were saved, in this exchange that never would have happened by the world's standards. It *was* the right thing to do.

What is our only comfort, in life and in death? That we belong, not to ourselves, but to God, however we name the divine, and through that belonging, we belong to one another, even if we live on opposite sides of brutal, intractable conflict.

Where do we find the strength to do the right thing, to reach out across the gulf we think cannot be crossed, to speak up and stand up when it may cost us?

“The Spirit helps us in our weakness,” Paul says. The
“Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”
(Romans 8:26)

The Spirit leads us to the hope we cannot see, but upon
which our very lives depend. That hope resides in the
place and in the moment when we discover we belong to
one another, and to a love larger than any one of us.

Amanda Gorman takes us there in her poem, *In this Place*.

“There’s a poem in this place —
a poem in America
a poet in every American
who rewrites this nation, who tells
a story worthy of being told on this minnow of an
earth
to breathe hope into a palimpsest of time —
a poet in every American
who sees that our poem penned
doesn’t mean our poem’s end.

There’s a place where this poem dwells —
it is here, it is now, in the yellow song of dawn’s bell
where we write an American lyric
we are just beginning to tell.”

On this Coming Together Sunday, we ask with the Apostle,

“If God is for us, who is against us?...Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” (Romans 8:31, 35)

Or pandemic, or racial injustice, or political animosity, or cultural polarity, or differing religions, languages, identities, and places of origin?

“No,” Paul says, “In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us...I am convinced that... nothing can separate us from the love of God.” (Romans 8:37, 39)

What is our only comfort in life and in death? *That we belong.*

Thanks be to God.

Amen.