

Our Romans text this morning sounds an awful lot like a trip through an anxious person's brain. Poor Paul is really struggling with something here, in his letter to the church in Rome. He is presenting us with spinning thoughts, and wrestling with knowing to do the right thing but having a hard time getting there to do the right thing.

It reminds me of some of the adulting struggles I've experienced, that I'm sure many of us have dealt with at some point or another. A classic is the whole battle of "I know I should go to bed right now but I really want to watch another episode on Netflix, this show is so amazing! Ugh, they make it so easy with auto-play. But sleep is good for me - ugh, why is it so hard to get off this couch?!" is perhaps familiar to many of us, or similar to our own struggles. And sometimes this wrestling goes deeper than just sleep or Netflix or sticking to your budget or things of that nature. Sometimes the wrestling is much deeper and painful. Maybe you're wrestling with a deep and painful mental health issue, struggling to keep yourself alive in the midst of your brain telling you otherwise. Sometimes the wrestling is in the pain of addiction, to substances, gambling, or any other compulsive and addictive behavior. We all have moments where we struggle with what we do not want to do, we know we don't want to do it, and yet changing course is really, really challenging.

But this is the gift of faith - we always have tangible guidance on which we can rely. We have the grace and promises and commandments of our loving creator, rooted in hope. We have the teachings and ministry of our Savior Jesus Christ to inspire and guide us. And we have the Holy Spirit, the creative breath of life who keeps us alive and keeps us centered no matter what burden or struggle we carry.

I am particularly taken with the phrase "prisoners of hope" in the Zechariah text today. Though these ideas may seem counterintuitive, that hope and prisoner don't really belong together, I think a deep understanding of what it is to spend your life following Christ, and using faith as guidance when we struggle, can be found in this meaning.

Hope is a strong and powerful state to be in. It means that you are not giving up on what is to come. If love is not giving up on the person or thing you love, then hope could be considered as love for what is to come, for what comes next. Hope has the power to cast out the fears that threaten to hold us captive. Hope is what brings the assurance of life after the death of the familiar. Hope is the Spirit breathing through us and giving us this new life every single day of our lives, even when we don't feel like it. Hope is nothing less than what Christ Jesus brings us in his very body, in His very death and resurrection.

As followers of Christ Jesus, we cannot help but hope. We are compelled to hope. We are compelled to see the new life that can rise from death. It's an innate part of who we are, in our faith in Christ Jesus. There is always hope, there is always light that shines in the darkness, there is always life to be found after death, there is always a future on which we can rely in grace, love, and hope.

But there is a certain caution that comes with hope. If we focus only on hope, on what is not yet here, we risk ignoring what is already around us. The most powerful hope comes from recognizing that where we are can and must be even better than it is now. Hope comes when we see clearly what is around us, and we find life in knowing things will shine forth in newness and in love.

And this is where the prisoner part comes in. As prisoners of hope, we cannot ignore the realities of what goes on around us. As the body of Christ, we are called to the time and place and world and neighbors around us. We are called to open our eyes and our hearts to our sisters and brothers. And as much as it is a beautiful and life-giving way to live, opening our hearts and minds to our siblings around us, it can get heavy sometimes. Especially when our sisters and brothers are dying because of the color of their skin or who they love or their ability to access healthcare

or a host of other human things. These are difficult realities to hold and to carry.

But Christ assures us that when we bring what we are carrying to him, that he will make it lighter. That we can lay our burdens upon him and find rest, because his burdens are easy and his yoke is light. Whatever we struggle with, whatever challenges we wrestle with, Christ Jesus makes those burdens lighter, and gives us rest from the struggle.

Jesus also claims himself as gentle and humble in heart. We hear this word “humble” in the Zechariah text too - that the triumphant king praised in this story is humble too. The king in Zechariah shows his humility by riding into Jerusalem on a lowly donkey, not a grand war horse as some may expect such a ruler to do. This humbleness is emphasized by describing his animal in three different ways. When we see the number three in scripture, we pay attention. And so Jesus too, as he triumphantly rides into Jerusalem before his crucifixion and resurrection, does so on a humble donkey. Not a chariot fit for a king, the King of Kings, as we often know him now, but a commonplace donkey.

In the midst of all this grandeur, the key word here is humble. Our circumstances may paint one picture, hold up one set of expectations for us, but in reality, in our humanity, humbleness is key. We are not always going to get it right. We are not always going to be in a state of perfect joy and happiness. We will still have struggles and challenges. And part of dealing with these struggles is remembering this humbleness for ourselves. We do not always have to be perfect. We do not have to meet the wildly high expectations that are often put upon us from a young age or well-meaning people we love. We must be gracious and kind to ourselves, and know that we are absolutely deserving of the rest and lightness promised to us by Jesus.

The way we come to know Christ in our times of trouble is through his

humbleness and gentleness. In our moments where we feel humbled, in times of grief or sadness or struggle or weariness or newness, it is these promises of being welcomed in with gentleness that comfort us. It's in recognizing our own humbleness, that we are simply human at our cores, that we can begin to let that love and ease and lightness of Christ fill our spirits.

So, dear friends in Christ, as we are rooted in hope through Christ Jesus, what things are yet to come that you will not give up on? What struggles or burdens can you lay upon Jesus? How can we bring God's reign even closer in this future?

Though the work for that reign, for the love of God and all people, may seem long and challenging and heavy, in Christ Jesus we find all hope. In Christ Jesus we can lay our heaviness, our burdens, and yokes, and take His up - the way of following Jesus, of taking his burdens and yokes is easier and lighter. And I pray that we may all be filled with Christ's holy rest for our souls, Jesus' holy and life-saving peace, and that our hopes for the future may be fulfilled in God's radical love. Thanks be to God, Amen.