



Sunday, Sept. 13, 2020
*Sermon Series: Searching for Hope During
Turbulent Times*

Opening Up About Traumatic Events
Pastor Vern Christopherson

Romans 8:17-28 THE MESSAGE

15-17 This resurrection life you received from God is not a timid, grave-tending life. It's adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike "What's next, Papa?" God's Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are. We know who he is, and we know who we are: Father and children. And we know we are going to get what's coming to us—an unbelievable inheritance! We go through exactly what Christ goes through. If we go through the hard times with him, then we're certainly going to go through the good times with him!

18-21 That's why I don't think there's any comparison between the present hard times and the coming good times. The created world itself can hardly wait for what's coming next. Everything in creation is being more or less held back. God reins it in until both creation and all the creatures are ready and can be released at the same moment into the glorious times ahead. Meanwhile, the joyful anticipation deepens.

22-25 All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it's not only around us; it's within us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We're also feeling the birth pangs. These sterile and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. That is why waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting. We, of course, don't see what is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy.

26-28 Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. He knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God. That's why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good.

I have a question for you: how are you doing these days? If you're tempted to answer *fine*, you'd fit right in. But would it be an accurate reflection of how

you're actually doing - really? Two, three, four times a week and more, we tend to answer *fine*, but it's often not the whole story, is it?

So, here's another question: when bad things happen to good people like you, do you tell anyone? It can feel awkward and risky. If you're anything like me, you might pause and wonder: Well, I'm not exactly fine, but do I really want to get into it here and now?

Our current sermon series is *Searching for Hope During Turbulent Times*. Today's focus is an important part of that search: "Opening up about traumatic events." These traumatic events might involve anything from a financial mess to family troubles to a diagnosis of cancer. Let's be honest, some of us have an easier time opening up than others. It's often easier for women than for men.

Some topics are less complicated. I mean, if a person has a cast on an arm, you'd probably ask about it. But what if that person has a black eye or a sad face or slurred speech - would it be okay to ask then? And if so, how much time can you devote to listening? Do you really want to know about family problems, or troubles at work, or the incredible isolation some might be feeling because of COVID-19? And even more importantly, are you able to listen without passing judgment or trying to fix them?

This is important work. Think about it: if someone were to ask how we're doing, and seem to genuinely care, what if we never said anything to anyone? That wouldn't be good for us, right, emotionally, spiritually, physically? From my perspective, opening up about traumatic events, at an appropriate time and place, might be one of the most life-giving things we can do - and not only for ourselves but for others too.

In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul encourages believers to share in each other's suffering. He reminds us that we're living a resurrection life and looking forward to a glorious inheritance. And yet, Paul says, it doesn't always feel that way for us. "We go through exactly what Christ goes through." But then Paul adds a glimmer of hope: "If we go through the hard times with Christ, then we're certainly going to go through the good times with him!"

Paul suggests that we ride out the hard times with patience. He compares our lives to that of an expectant mother. Maybe a bit indelicately, Paul describes it like this: "We are enlarged in our waiting, joyful in our expectancy. And even though we can't exactly see what's down the road, the longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy."

Again, with our modern sensibilities, we probably wouldn't put it quite like Paul does. But we get the drift of it: life is hard; waiting is a challenge; we're not always sure what's coming next; there's plenty of suffering to go around; but hope is on the way. How we navigate the hard times is a big part of our journey of faith, Paul is saying. "When all we can do is groan and sigh, the Spirit prays for us with wordless sighs and aching groans too deep for words. The Spirit knows us better than we know ourselves. The Spirit brings our cares and concerns to God." Paul is soaring: "That's why we can be sure that every detail in our lives of love for God can be worked into something good."

This latest thought is from Romans 8:28. It's one of my favorite verses in the Bible. It regularly reminds me that even though we might not fully understand and even though our lives don't always feel *fine*, we trust that God can turn things, even bad things, into something positive and life-giving and hopeful.

Perhaps we need to be looking for times and places to open up about traumatic events. I know, it can be scary and hard. We often feel vulnerable. There's a time and a place for seeking professional help in therapists and counselors. But beyond that, if we trust the person in front of us, that can be good for us too. We might come to realize that we are not alone after all, and we're not going crazy thinking the way we do.

Some of you know that I haven't been able to drive for the past three months. My license got suspended because I had a couple of small seizures. The first one showed up the night before Easter. Around 7:00 o'clock I fell into a deep sleep for 10 minutes or so. Suddenly I woke with a start and was totally discombobulated. On the night before Easter, mind you, I didn't know where I was, what day it was, and what I was going to do about it. I called home and scared my family half to death. Eventually things started to make sense again. And by the next day, everything felt fine.

But then it happened again in early June, when I was sitting down to a conversation with Pastor Jason. I decided I better get it checked out. After a few days of testing, I heard from my neurologist, Dr. Bob Brown, that I'd had a couple of seizures. It's not uncommon for those who've had brain injury...especially when you combine it with too little sleep. Dr. Brown prescribed a medication to level off my "sharp brain waves" and hopefully to keep it from happening again. And there was one thing more from the good doctor: after having a seizure, the state of Minnesota requires you to give up driving for three full months.

Gulp! I wasn't ready for that one. I did a quick inventory. I was glad to have an apartment only 4 blocks from the church. I was relieved we were staying closer to home anyway because of the pandemic. I knew I needed to tell someone about it: the staff, the Personnel Team, and the Church Council. But

beyond that, I wasn't sure anyone else needed to know...and I wasn't sure I wanted to get into it anyway.

Along the way, I had lots of people encouraging me, praying for me, and offering to give me rides. I was grateful for that. Truth be told, though, as the months dragged on, the harder it became. I'd put people through enough. I got tired of asking for rides. I didn't want to be a burden. That feeling grew stronger and stronger.

You might be wondering how I'm doing these days. I'm happy to report that I'm feeling good. The new medication is working well. I'm even getting a bit more sleep. Follow-up tests have shown no additional seizure activity or injury. So why I am telling you this now? Because I got my license back this past Wednesday. It was a tremendous relief. And hopefully - kind as you are - none of you will have to give me a ride anytime soon.

How important is it to open up about traumatic events? Probably more important than we know. Even if we don't want to be a burden, the load can get quite heavy some days, almost too much to bear. But keep in mind, "every detail in our lives of love for God can be worked into something good."

Bob and Kristy Giere took daughter Erikka to their cabin in the middle of August. In case you don't know, Erikka has Down's Syndrome. She lives in a group home here in Rochester. Bob and Kristy wanted to take her to their cabin near Hayward, Wisconsin. It had been a couple of years since she'd been there. On top of that, it had been a hard summer for the family. Kristy's mom and Erikka's grandmother, Ardis, had died in July. They wanted to spend time together as a family. Bob and Kristy especially wanted to create a memorable experience for Erikka.

On Friday morning they took off in their canoe across Osprey Lake. They got across the lake and were heading into a channel toward another lake. Just then a furry, little mouse showed up in their canoe. Erikka, who's terrified of mice, panicked. She stood up. And before you know it, the canoe capsized, and they were completely submerged. They had on life jackets, but Erikka's jacket didn't fit well and it wasn't secure. The channel was filled with weeds and sticks and debris. It was all they could do to make a way in the murky water which was over their heads. Erikka was clinging to Kristy for dear life. They were worried sick they might drown.

Eventually Bob, who's had Boy Scout training, and Kristy were able to get their bearings and get some water out of the canoe. Bob swam it over to the edge of the channel. A little later, Kristy and Erikka were able to join him. They got back in the boat. And would you believe, they had to turn the canoe around and head back across Osprey Lake to get to their cabin.

They didn't sleep very well that night. The traumatic event played over and over in their minds. But looking back, they did see a silver lining. They were so very grateful that the mouse hadn't appeared in the middle of the lake; they probably wouldn't have made it back to shore. And they were grateful the water was warm, and so was the air temperature, so they were not at risk of hypothermia. "It could have been worse," Bob said, but they were incredibly relieved that it wasn't.

How important is it to open up about traumatic events? Probably more important than we know. These events give us perspective. They remind us of what's important in life. Remember, "every detail in our lives of love for God can be worked into something good."

In the winter of 2020, Pat Campbell of Zumbro was diagnosed with prostate cancer. And then a week later, Pat was diagnosed with a low-grade lymphoma. Doctors wanted to deal with the prostate first. Pat was scheduled for 26 radiation treatments. He was assured the prognosis was good. The cancer was treatable and curable. Everything was going according to plan. But then, toward the end of the radiation treatments, Pat began to feel pain in his lower back. More trips to the doctor. Pat was told his lymphoma had turned aggressive. He would soon need to begin 6 rounds of chemotherapy extending 4-5 months.

The treatment was getting harder and more complicated. There were many unknowns. Pat shared the news with his wife Karen, of course. He opened up to their daughters, Christine and Kate. He told his brothers. He also shared it with his Tuesday Bible Study group. And I'm sure you can imagine, in the midst of Pat's transparency, there were questions and concerns and plenty of prayers.

Pat has been deeply grateful for the support of community. He's not quite done with the chemo, but he's getting closer. He's humble and gracious as he talks about his troubles. Karen shared it with the Rebekah Circle as well. Because of it, the load has felt just a little lighter for both of them.

Friends, life is filled with uncertainty. As I see it, everyone is walking around with something. It's often hard for us to talk about it. If you have a friend or two, or a family member or two, who are willing to listen, I encourage you to open up to them. Share the load. We need to be assured that we are not alone on the journey. We are not alone during turbulent times. Others have been there ahead of us. Some are willing to be right beside us even now.

There is plenty of suffering to go around. Maybe, just maybe, hope is on the way! On top of everything, friends, keep trusting that "every detail in our lives of love for God can be worked into something good." Amen.

