

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
The Genesis of Our Faith: Purpose  
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Genesis 50:15-21; Romans 8:18-30

This coming Saturday will be twenty years since our nation was attacked and the Twin Towers came down with a horrific loss of life. In the days and weeks after that event the nation came together as one, determined not to allow the terrorists to defeat us. Unfortunately, that unity did not last long. Slowly but surely, we began to divide into the competing camps that had existed before 9/11. And things have only gotten worse and today we are divided over masks, vaccines, abortion, the need for racial reconciliation, the discussion of the history of slavery and race in our schools, climate change, the winner of the 2020 election for president, the withdrawal from Afghanistan, Medicaid expansion, welcoming Afghan refugees, voting rights and even whether Covid-19 is real...yes whether Covid-19 is real and kills people. The problem with this level of division is that it is causing people to be angry, depressed, fatalistic, and helpless. And we as a nation are not alone in these divisions; the rest of the world is following suit. The question then is, how are we to respond to these divisions?

The answer to that question can be found in Paul's letter to the church in Rome, is that we are to be a people of patient hope, trusting that God is still working God's purpose out. Let me unpack this, beginning with the last portion, that God is still working God's purpose out. Paul's letter to the church in Rome is an attempt to help his readers understand that from the beginning of time God desired a world that lived in harmony, in peace, and in justice. When human beings messed up this harmonious world, God's purpose became to remake it. This is the core of Romans 8 where Paul writes that creation itself will be "*set free from bondage and decay and will obtain the freedom of the children of God*" ...meaning that creation will be recreated just as those who follow Jesus have been recreated. In other words, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is just a foretaste of the restored creation that God is at work bringing about. And even though there is suffering in the meantime, Paul says it is not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us. He encourages the Roman Christians, and us, to not give up hope because God has not given up on God's own purposeful plans to remake creation.

This assurance of God's continuing purposeful activity is what is supposed to call us to be people of patient hope. I know that patient hope can sound like passive wishing. But it is not. First, Biblical hope is not a wish. Hope is a belief in the future based on past actions. When Cindy and I decided to have our driveway redone, we did not randomly choose someone online. Instead, we read reviews, asked for references, looked at other driveways the companies had done and then chose a company with a good track record of good work. We had hope then that

our driveway would be well done. This the hope Paul is talking about. The hope that God is recreating creation is based on the recreating work that God has already done for humanity in Jesus of Nazareth. The Roman Christians had experienced becoming new people, new creations in Christ. Therefore, they could have hope that God was doing the same thing in creation itself.

The second part of this equation is patience. Patience here is not a passive acceptance of what is, but the willingness to continue working even when things aren't brought to completion. I have to say that I admire those who do cancer research. Year after year they experiment and run trials hoping that they will find a breakthrough that will cure cancer. They don't say, "Well if I haven't cured cancer in a week, then I will quit." This is patience. Patience is an attitude that Jesus followers are to have as they work for the Kingdom of God. We are to see ourselves as part of a process of recreation in which we may see little progress, but that lack of progress is not to stop us from engaging in Kingdom actions of loving God and loving neighbor.

If we want to see what patient hope looks like all we need to do is look at the life of Joseph. He was a young man called by God to be an agent of salvation. Even so, his brothers hated him, conspired against him, and sold him into slavery. As a slave he was mistreated, forgotten about, and even when he was at his best, ignored. Yet, through all his misadventures, Joseph was patient. He never whined to God that he was being mistreated. He never gave God a timetable or a set of demands. He lived with hope, believing that God's past faithfulness would, in the end, be made evident in his life. He sums up this patient hope when his brothers, who once again lie to him about what their father had told them, says this, "*Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.*" This is the kind of patient hope to which Paul is referring. This is the kind of patient hope that we are to have in the face of all the anger, pettiness, and pain we are all enduring. We are to be patient in hope that God is still working God's purpose out.

The question for all of us this day, as we head toward the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 911, is to ask ourselves, how am I showing patient hope, trusting that God is still working God's purpose out?