

God's arms: Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

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Living by the Word

by Michael L. Lindvall

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With the doctrine of the Trinity garnering fresh attention in recent decades, I dare to preach more often about the Trinity, and have found congregations appreciative. The John 16 text is one of several in John that bring Father, Son and Holy Spirit into dynamic proximity and invite a Trinity Sunday theological sermon.

But even as I write this, it's Paul's daunting promise to the Romans that haunts me: "Suffering produces endurance," he assures the Romans and us, "and endurance produces character and character produces hope." Recently I stood in the pulpit of my church and looked over the top of a white, 32-inch-long casket at a young couple from my congregation. Their six-month-old son, who had been happy and healthy just days before, had died in his sleep. The unfathomable suffering of the family was shadowed by a church filled with mourners for whom the scene enacted their most dreaded fears.

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So Paul's promise haunts me. Will the suffering in my church's sanctuary produce "endurance, character and hope"? Will the suffering of Iraqi mothers mourning their sons produce character? Will the suffering of American wives, husbands and children mourning soldier spouses and parents produce hope? Hemingway quipped that the "world breaks everyone" and that some "grow strong in the broken places." Some do, and some don't. How is it that suffering can produce character, endurance and hope?

I know from experience that hope rises strongest in those who do not suffer in isolation. We are created for life together. Joys are sweeter when we revel in them together; pain shared will more likely make our broken places strong. So I told that grieving family in my church that they would need each other in a way they never had before.

Leslie Weatherhead told about a difficult pastoral call he once made to a grieving family:

In one corner an old white-haired woman sitting in a low chair, her face half hidden by her hand. . . . Her other hand is on the shoulder of a younger woman, little more than a girl, who is sitting at her feet. There is a fire in the grate. . . . The younger had only been married three months, and then death stalked her . . . husband through pneumonia, and brought him down at last. It was the day after the funeral. Suddenly the younger woman turns almost ferociously on me. . . . "Where is God?" she demands. "I've prayed to Him. . . . Where is He? . . . You preached once on the 'Everlasting Arms.' Where are they?" . . . I drew my fingertips lightly down the older woman's arm. "They are here," I said. "They are round you even now. These are the arms of God."

When we suffer together, God becomes present to us in the arm of the other resting upon our shoulders. As a pastor, I know that Paul's promised "endurance, character and hope" will be more likely to grow in those whose suffering is shared.

But at the heart of our Christian faith is a more radical, even scandalous, trust that God—in God's self—also suffers with us. The cross planted at the center of this faith is the high-water mark of suffering. It declares that God descends with us to the depths of life: "There is no pain that you can bear that I have not embraced; there is no darkness that can overtake you that I have not seen; there is no fear that might grip you that I have not known. I have passed through it, and when you pass through it, I am with you."

Some years ago, I was moving furniture with a good friend, a junior high school shop teacher named John. The furniture was coming out of the apartment of a widow who had just made a wrenching decision to move into a nursing home. The rest was going to the Salvation Army. Helen, our mutual friend, had slept surrounded by this veneered department store bedroom suite all her life. She had no children to leave it to, so she had given the old bedroom set to my young daughter. It was an unhappy moving day, emptying rooms full of memories into John's truck.

Each trip from apartment to curb seemed to set the two of us thinking about deeper things. We were about to carry out the headboard of the old mahogany bedstead when John suddenly stopped, and, with a few carefully chosen words, spoke about the death of his infant child many years ago. I knew about it, but we had never spoken of it. He was silent for a moment. Then he set his end down and looked at me, nodded toward the heavens and said, "He's been there, that's all there is to say, God's been there."

Which brings us home to the Trinity, the doctrine hammered out by the church centuries ago in order to understand God in a way faithful to scripture. The Trinity promises the presence of a vulnerable and suffering God, a Savior who is with us in our suffering and who, in solidarity, grows in us the "endurance, character and hope" Paul promised. First and last, the Trinity guards the very truth proclaimed by John the Evangelist and Paul the Apostle, our trust that Jesus is truly God and truly human, or to use the words of my friend John, the Trinity declares that our trust is in a God "who has been there."

