

Sermon: Standing in Hope

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, June 15, 2025)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Author and editor Rodney Clapp, contributing to the Christian Century Magazine in 2012, drew attention to a letter column of an in-flight magazine he came across, where one reader wrote about his love of air travel. This is what was said about the airline: “has all the qualities I look for in my future bride: always on time, greets me with a smile, welcomes me home and takes care of me during our time together. OK, so I’m a hopeless romantic who thinks I will meet my future wife on my next flight.” Others also wrote describing air travel as “comforting” and “enjoyable”. Granted that in-flight magazines are self-serving by nature, with a mandate to promote their own airline. But ‘always on time’? You got to be kidding me!

I don’t know about your experience, but from what I have observed, air travel truly is a test of patience. It begins in the ticketing line where one is badgered to cough up extra fees for checked-in baggage, for extra leg-room, to select a seat, or (this is the latest) to bring with you a carry-on. This test of patience ramps up in the security line, where waiting in a long queue is the norm. Once one makes it through the maze and arrives at the front of the line, then came the ‘undressing’—of shoes, belt, jewelry, changes in pocket, or laptop in knapsack—all under the steely gaze of security personnel with very little patience, nor tolerance and a zero sense of humour.

Heading towards the boarding gate, one will inevitable confront the check-in line, where intercom announcement is always muffled, where one is never sure if back of the plane will board first or it’s the other way around, and the crowd will most certainly crowd around you regardless of which section they belong to in the boarding queue.

Once you are safely seated, you still have to watch for other passengers dragging their oversized luggage down the aisle or dropping them on your unsuspecting head. The seats themselves are, of course, compact and cramped, designed not to maximize passenger comfort but airline profits. Then there is dealing with crying children, overtly animated seatmates, or those who think armrests are for their arms only.

Once the plane lands, one waits again to disembark, to collect luggage, and for some, waiting furthermore for taxi or other mode of transportation. What I have described so far represents only the ordinary, not the extraordinary—such as lost luggage, delayed or cancelled flights. Need I go on?

Perhaps I am being a bit unfair to air travel, given how difficult and prolonged travel was prior to the advent of the jet age. Coming out of COVID, out of that three plus years of restrictions and lockdown, most of us are quite appreciative of the importance of in-person contacts, whether for business, leisure or simply hugging a love one. Air travel gives us that, and in the process, it tutors us on the virtue of patience, even if we have to suffer a little while. Suffering, as the Apostle Paul puts it so aptly, produces patience; patience produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame (Romans 5:3).

What then is ‘hope’? Though the word hope appears more than 150 times in the English translation of the Bible, it nevertheless is somewhat of an abstract concept. In that evocative triad of faith, hope and love, in 1 Corinthians 13:13, hope is somewhat neglected, like a second child. Now I say that with little authority, for I am not a second child; I am the last, and the most precious, according to experts in family system theory. But I have heard complaints of neglect from my own sister, who is a second child, and from my wife Daisy, who is also a second child. In light of faith which actually has a father figure attached to it—ie. Abraham the father of faith. And in light of love which is described as the ‘greatest of these’, I can totally see hope like a neglected second child, jumping up and down while complaining: what about me? What about me?

What about hope? Hope is, to the best of my ability to explain, oriented towards something in the future, that one expects but does not yet possess. It is intangible, immaterial, and it may not even be seen. As the Apostle Paul explains a few chapters later in Romans 8:24, “Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what one already sees?” So in essence, hope is something one does not yet possess, does not even see, yet expects. Therefore, as the Apostle Paul concludes, we wait for it with patience.

Hope is often built on the foundation of something else. Apostle Paul opens this chapter of Romans 5 with the word ‘therefore’. It is a connective word, connecting what he is about to say with what he had said before. He had already established the idea of justification by faith by using the

example of Abraham, how he believed in God's promise, and "it was reckoned to him as righteousness". Drawing the same parallel, Paul further explains that it will also be reckoned to us who believe in God who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.

Therefore, our faith in Jesus Christ is what justifies us, reckoned by God to us, to have peace with God. This is a grace; it is a gift of God, and it is by such grace we now stand, confident and secure, hoping, knowing, even boasting about sharing in one day in the glory of God.

It is the same argument that Jesus himself advanced, for those who worry. *"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you?"* (Matthew 6:28-30)

In the same line of thinking, if God is willing to send his one and only begotten Son to us, to die on the cross for us—his words convict us, his blood cleanses us, his wounds heal us. Then God raised Jesus up from the dead, and raised him up to the heaven in glory. Will the same God not also raise us up, those who believe, to be raised so to share in the glory of God in Jesus Christ? Of course God will! It is on such hope we stand, and we dare to boast. Hallelujah, praise be to God; Praise be to God, Hallelujah!

This word 'boast' is an interesting verb in both Greek and Hebrew. It is always conjugated in the 'middle voice', that is the action of the verb is done onto oneself. It is inwardly looking, always seeking to give glory onto self. However, the way the Apostle Paul uses it is somewhat different, refreshing even. Paul boasts not about himself, but about what God is doing through him.

For Paul recognizes and acknowledges that boasting in anything other than God affronts God. Boasting about self is an arrogant act of self-sufficiency. It symbolizes fallen humanity's natural inclination to trust in human wisdom, might, wealth, rather than in God. As God said so through Jeremiah the prophet (9:23-24), *"Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom; do not let the mighty boast in their might; do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord."*

So Paul boasts, not about himself though he certainly has much to boast about. No, Paul boasts about enduring suffering and waiting

patiently. For he knows that God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. In five short verses of this chapter of Romans 5, Paul not only explains to us the interconnected work of the Triune God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Paul implores us to take part in this work, by waiting and standing in hope.

As so often, the Apostle Paul puts us into the right perspective, the right frame of mind. We understand that the whole of creation has been groaning inwardly and patiently, for God to make all things right. Though we know such redemption and salvation are all but assured, but we can only wait with patience. Perhaps standing in line in an airport, waiting for a flight isn't so bad. It is an opportunity to be trained in the virtue of patience, an opportunity to breathe, to reflect, and to pray. Perhaps it is an opportunity to give thanks to God, for we stand not in line, but in hope, and hope in Christ does not put us to shame. Hope will not disappoint!

Allow me to leave with you a short story I came across. In the year 1982, during the time when Vice President George Bush represented the U.S. at the funeral of former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. Bush witnessed and was deeply moved by a silent protest carried out by Brezhnev's widow. She stood motionless by the coffin until seconds before it was to be closed. Just then, as the soldiers touched the lid, Brezhnev's widow performed an act of great courage and hope, a gesture that must surely rank as one of the most profound acts of civil disobedience ever committed: she bowed and made a sign of the cross over her husband.

There in the citadel of communism, a stronghold against God, the widow of the man who had ruled it all hoped that her husband was wrong. At that Red Square, in front of the party apparatus, before a military parade, witnessed by the whole world, this widow of Brezhnev stood in her grief and in hope. Contrary to the teaching of Marxism, she hoped that there was another life, and that life was best represented by Jesus who died on the cross, and that same Jesus might yet have mercy on her husband, and may yet have mercy for her country.

That's hope in action! Hallelujah, praise be to God

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**