

1 From Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will, and Timothy our brother. To God's church that is in Corinth, along with all of God's people throughout Achaia.  
2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.  
3 May the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ be blessed! He is the compassionate Father and God of all comfort. 4 He's the one who comforts us in all our trouble so that we can comfort other people who are in every kind of trouble. We offer the same comfort that we ourselves received from God. 5 That is because we receive so much comfort through Christ in the same way that we share so many of Christ's sufferings. 6 So if we have trouble, it is to bring you comfort and salvation. If we are comforted, it is to bring you comfort from the experience of endurance while you go through the same sufferings that we also suffer. 7 Our hope for you is certain, because we know that as you are partners in suffering, so also you are partners in comfort.  
8 Brothers and sisters, we don't want you to be unaware of the troubles that we went through in Asia. We were weighed down with a load of suffering that was so far beyond our strength that we were afraid we might not survive. 9 It certainly seemed to us as if we had gotten the death penalty. This was so that we would have confidence in God, who raises the dead, instead of ourselves. 10 God rescued us from a terrible death, and he will rescue us. We have set our hope on him that he will rescue us again, 11 since you are helping with your prayer for us. Then many people can thank God on our behalf for the gift that was given to us through the prayers of many people. (**Common English Bible Translation**)

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I spoke with a church member this week who expressed deep appreciation for the on-line worship we've been sharing in these past several months. Recently we have found a way to share videos of the worship with another church member who has been cut off these past several months and she has been tickled to see everyone during the passing of the peace and sing along with the Feely family. I found myself saying more than once this week that if you had told me six months ago we would be worshipping via zoom and Facebook I would have told you you were crazy, but that indeed there have been great blessings in it. None greater than our Easter service, I think. That service with the voices of nearly 15 in our fellowship spontaneously sharing resurrection stories... to which we responded with so many alleluias... it was breathtaking. One of you wrote me an e-mail after that service saying that while you miss the pomp of grand festival days in the sanctuary, the flowering of the cross, the brass... you found our zoom celebration truly remarkable, and one that would not easily be forgotten.

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But we never could have imagined that come July so we still would be worshipping. And we have no idea when it will be safe for us to do anything resembling praise and glorious worship, together, physically gathered in one place. And we worship now, as it is good and right to do so, because God is good, all the time, all the time, God is good, so we worship virtually now in the midst of great national, international, and for some, personal suffering. Several of you commented that it seemed uncanny that the lectionary offered us Job for the last five weeks. Well, Roberta read ahead to prepare some children's lessons and she was in awe of how well 2 Corinthians responds to Job. Perhaps you were getting that sense with what I just read to you. In 2 Corinthians, one encounters a suffering church with a suffering savior. Paul reminds us that the God we worship went all the way to the cross. We have a cross at the heart of our faith— an instrument of death, of public execution... akin to an electric chair, or lynching tree, only slower, more gruesome, more humiliating. We have a suffering savior at the heart of our faith. Suffering. And that savior, before he died, suggested that his followers must take up their crosses and follow him. Jesus never promises that following him will exempt one from suffering. Following Jesus carries one into a very particular form of suffering- the suffering of self-sacrifice, and identification with the wounds of the world at least; and at many points in Christian history, and in many places in the world even today, following Jesus invites persecution, and violent oppression— suffering.

I once read a book called *Take This Bread*. It is a memoir written by a woman, Sara Miles, who came to Christian faith in adulthood. She was transformed at Christ's table— she wandered into an Episcopal church with a wide open table and answered the invitation to receive bread and cup and found herself weeping as she received both. And very shortly thereafter she felt called to feed as she had been fed and created a food pantry that operated out of the very same sanctuary in which she first felt fed so well. The process of establishing the food pantry and serving its clients brought with it a fair bit of suffering— internal wrangling in the congregation, interfacing with difficult people who came for food, witnessing extreme poverty and distress. Much about her participation in the church, not only through this feeding ministry, carried her straight into suffering.

She writes: “I was unloading groceries one Friday when I spotted Sasha standing out back by the baptismal font, as if she were waiting for someone. Sasha was a very small black girl, maybe six or seven years old, who usually came to the pantry with an impatient, teenage aunt. I’d never met her mother. Sasha’s hair wasn’t always combed, and this day she had a split lip. ‘Sweetheart!’ I said. I was glad to see her again. ‘Want a snack? There’s some chips inside.’

“Sasha looked at me, not smiling. ‘Is this the water God puts on you to make you safe?’ she demanded abruptly, in a strangely formal voice.”

Sara then goes on to reflect on the consequences of her own baptism just a few years before:

“Nothing about that water had made me safe. It had pushed me further out from the certainties and habits of my former life, taken me away from my family, and launched me on this mad and frustrating mission to feed multitudes. It had eroded my identity as an objective journalist and given me an unsettling glimpse of how very little I knew. I was no less flawed or frightened or capable of being hurt than I’d been before my conversion, and now, in addition, I was adrift in this water, yoked together with all kinds of other Christians, many of whom I didn’t like or trust.

“How could I tell this child that a drop of water could make her safe? I had no idea what Sasha was going through at home, but I suspected it was rough. And baptism, if it signified anything, signified the unavoidable reality of the cross at the heart of Christian faith. It wasn’t a magic charm but a reminder of God’s presence in the midst of unresolved human pain.”

I want to come back to Sara’s story of Sasha in just a moment, but first I want to turn back to the beginning of 2nd Corinthians. It is clear from the 11 verses we read this morning that Paul experienced a great deal of suffering in his ministry— and not just low grade suffering, but rather intense, brought to verge of death, pressed BEYOND his limits suffering. And he is writing to a community that was suffering, oppressed and hurting in myriad ways. But though Paul has a lot to say about suffering in these 11 verses, he has as much to say about comfort, doesn’t he? At his most intense moment of suffering, he experienced deliverance that only God could provide, which brought with it unbelievable comfort— you might even call it a peace that passes all understanding.

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And he believes that he received this comfort from God, in the midst of the suffering into which his ministry carried him, in order to be able to comfort others in their suffering. And it seems that Paul may think that the comfort and deliverance he received from God came in part because of all the Christians who were praying for him. I get the sense from this passage that Christians are intimately linked to one another, carrying one another to God on the shoulders of our prayers for one another, suffering with our suffering savior, but comforted by God through our relationships with one another.

Sara couldn't promise Sasha that baptism would make her safe. But nonetheless when Sasha insisted she wanted the water, she baptized her and invited a priest who happened to be in the room to anoint her. The priest asked Sasha if she wanted a special blessing and she said "Yes, I want that." "I'm going to put my hands on you and pray now, if you're ready," [the priest] said, and Sasha nodded.... 'Jesus is always with you,' [the priest] told Sasha as she finished rubbing the oil on her skin, 'no matter what happens to you, even when bad things happen. You're not ever alone.' Sasha closed her eyes for a moment, then looked down directly at the seated priest, and I saw something flowing between them: the child, crucified, anointing [the priest] with the power of her crucifixion, and [the priest], receiving it, anointing Sasha." The next time Sasha came to the pantry she leaped into Sara's arms and kissed her, and asked if they could find the priest for another special blessing.

This little story speaks to me of the interplay of suffering and comfort that unfolds in Christian community, the way that when we are in genuine ministry, truly following Christ, we come face to face with suffering, and we have the opportunity to lay hands on one another, or lock eyes with one another, or lift prayers for one another... or all of the above.

Part of what made our Easter service so powerful was the mutual ministry in which we engaged. I believe we all drew comfort from one another's resurrection stories of hope, life, and renewal. We drew comfort just from hearing each others' voices. We drew comfort from testimonies to life that emerges from death. Similarly those who gathered for socially distant service parties have drawn comfort in serving side by side, if distantly so, to attend to the needs of suffering neighbors. And I hope that every week, in

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our online worship and fellowship, we're finding that comfort that only God can provide in the midst of great suffering, not safety, but comfort, peace that passes understanding. This, my friends, is what the gift of the Spirit makes possible. By the Spirit we have been joined together in love. We are not given the Spirit that we might avoid all suffering henceforth and forever more, but rather that we might receive comfort from God in the midst of suffering and be able to comfort one another.

So it is that I am inviting you today into small groups during worship, to pray with one another. So, like we did on Easter, but in a more intimate way, we can engage in mutual ministry, so that the prayers of the people will truly be the prayers of the people. As we know well right now, not every moment of Christian faith and love will be flowered crosses, glorious choirs and instrumentalists, and joy and laughter, but in every moment of Christian faith we have one another and the comfort of God mediated through our bonds with one another. Let us offer one another, and those seeking Christian fellowship, special blessings that keep God's comfort flowing- let's do so in our prayer time today, but let's also do so this week by sending cards and making calls, and maybe even making some socially distant visits to those who are not finding their way to worship with us on-line. Friends, we worship a God of comfort who is no stranger to suffering. Thanks be to God.

Resource in addition to scripture which was cited in this sermon:

Sara Miles. *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2007.