

**Sermon :: 14-June-2026**  
**Proper 6, Year A**

“ and CHARACTER produces *HOPE* ”

What’s *your* go-to aphorism for times of stress and adversity? There’s always “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” And Nietzsche’s classic: “That which doesn’t kill us makes us stronger.” Or that quintessential Britishism: “Keep calm and carry on.” And even Dolly Parton’s “storms make trees take deeper roots.” (OK, I’ll admit: I learned that last one only while preparing this sermon!) When I was growing up, the one *I* heard over and over again was, “Stick with it—it’ll be *good* for you!”

Saint Paul was neither a philosopher nor a country-western singer ... but he, too, it seems, couldn’t resist coining, in his letter to the Christians in Rome, his *own* pithy quote about the benefits of “keep on keepin’ on”: “SUFFERING<sup>1</sup> produces ENDURANCE ... and ENDURANCE produces CHARACTER ... and CHARACTER produces HOPE.” Now, I think we all ‘get’ the *first* three links in this Pauline chain:

- When we *SUFFER* ... maybe physically, maybe socially or economically, maybe emotionally or even existentially ... we adapt to *new realities*: We ‘develop’ ... ‘toughen up’ ... maybe even ‘harden’ a bit ... as we learn ways of coping and understanding, of grieving and letting go.
- And these new ways of being, even though we didn’t *seek* them, provide us *ENDURANCE*: a firmness, a resolve, a willingness ... or, at the very least, a *resignation* ... to keep going. What afflicts us may be *temporary* or *forever* ... something we can *address* or something we just have to *accept* ... but it *isn’t* going to *stop* us!
- And *when* we’ve *ENDURED* ... confronted, contended with, combatted or even conceded to ... the obdurate reality that besets us, *then* we develop *CHARACTER*: We grow stronger, whether physically or mentally ... we gain patience or perspective or pliability ... we come to firmer inner ground ... calmer psychic waters ... less turbulent emotional air. While nothing in our *context* may have changed ... something very important within our *make-up has*.

And at *this* point ... had Paul been a self-help guru ... he probably would have made the *final* link in his chain something like, “and CHARACTER produces *wisdom*” or “*maturity*” or “*resilience*” ... or, to use a word that was all the rage ten or twelve years ago, “*grit*.”

But Paul is a theologian, not a sidewalk psychologist ... and what his own arduous faith journey teaches him is that the arc of CHARACTER—resolve, discipline, equanimity—points *outward*, rather than *inward*. CHARACTER doesn’t lead us to rely more and more upon our *own selves*, Paul says ... but, rather, opens us to the goodness—the steadfast, unconditional *love* and always-abounding, often-astounding *grace*—of *God* that never leave us and never let us down. And *Paul’s* word for this is *HOPE*: the HOPE of God’s love that Jesus went to the Cross to *procure* for us, forever ... the HOPE of God’s presence that Holy Spirit never ceases *being* for us, in our hearts. It’s when we’ve walked the long, arduous pathway from SUFFERING to ENDURANCE ... and from ENDURANCE to CHARACTER, Paul says,

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<sup>1</sup> The NRSVue translation renders this AFFLICTION, but SUFFERING seems more visceral.

that the *true* HOPE ... the *full* HOPE ... the *forever* HOPE ... of God—God *with* us, God *for* us, God *in* us—is finally *opened* to us, and we can, at last, find *peace*.

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We might take the story of Sarah, Abraham’s wife, as an illustration of Paul’s teaching.<sup>2</sup> As you may recall from last week, God called Abraham and Sarah,<sup>3</sup> then in their mid-seventies,<sup>4</sup> to leave their homeland and travel to the strange, distant land of Canaan, where they, alone, would give birth to a people whom God would make into a “great nation.” Well, *now*, some twenty-five years have passed, and while things’ve gone fairly well, *overall* ... they haven’t had a *child*,<sup>5</sup> and as the mother- and father-to-be are both approaching one hundred, the prospects aren’t looking too good!

But in today’s delightful, wonderfully human—indeed, almost whimsical—story, God’s messengers reiterate God’s promise ... much to Sarah’s amusement: Sarah *will* give birth to *son*. She can’t help giggling at the very *thought* of it ... and then maybe again when she does, at last, give *birth* ... for she names her newborn son ISAAC: “one who laughs.”

No doubt, the birth of a child is a source of HOPE for Sarah and Abraham in the same way it is for *all* parents: the extension of the line ... the expansion of the family ... the passing-along of heritage.<sup>6</sup> But we’d be mistaken if we thought *all* Sarah and Abraham have been HOPING for was an *heir* ... a *survivor* ... a *helpmate* in their old age. No, they are chosen-of-God ... missionaries ... the new ‘Adam and Eve,’ as it were, of God’s new plan for humanity ... and their *true* HOPE has been to bring into this world ... after seven or eight *decades* of childlessness: SUFFERING, ENDURANCE, CHARACTER—CHARACTER *galore!* ... the first small fruit of a mighty tree that God will grow into Israel. And in Isaac, the HOPE of God’s steadfast, unconditional *love* and always-abounding, often-astounding *grace* ... is, at last, realized *completely*.

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HOPElessness: The word is on the lips of just about *everyone* these days, I reckon, as, more and more, the nation ... the world ... and maybe even the planet itself ... appear to be sinking into ever more troubling times. Historians tell us that, all things considered, we’re *wrong*—that this world’s lived through far bleaker ages ... and no doubt, they’re correct. But as the seemingly intractable polarization of our ¶political system ... meets a seemingly intractable ¶affordability crisis ... meets a seemingly intractable ¶break-down of our cohesion as a nation ... meets a seemingly intractable ¶crumbling of a once-stable world order ... meets the seemingly intractable ¶geopolitical hydra of climate change *and* artificial intelligence ... well, it’s pretty difficult, some days, to gin up a whole lot of HOPE, *isn’t* it? If, per Paul, SUFFERING produces ENDURANCE, and ENDURANCE produces CHARACTER ...

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<sup>2</sup> I hedge a bit, with MIGHT, as this Old Testament reading was not intentionally paired with Paul’s writing. When the so-called Track 1 readings, a “semi-continuous” walk through the Old Testament during three consecutive seasons of Ordinary Time, were adopted, they were merely appended to already thematically paired couplets of New Testament and Gospel readings. While, as today, it’s sometimes profitable to ‘juxtapose’ the OT readings with the NT and Gospel readings, during Ordinary Time, we cannot assume an intentional theological affinity. (Such affinity, however, *is* intended from Advent through Eastertide.)

<sup>3</sup> Initially, their names were ABRAM and SARAI; God later changed them (Gen 17).

<sup>4</sup> Sarah’s age is never explicitly given. I’ve assumed she and Abraham are roughly the same age, even though marriages between men and women who were ten and twelve years apart were not uncommon in this time.

<sup>5</sup> Abraham *has* had a son with Sarah’s maid Hagar. His name is Ishmael.

<sup>6</sup> And how much *more* so in an agrarian, hand-to-mouth society like the one Abraham and Sarah lived in.

then our times must have some sort of 'corner' on CHARACTER the likes of which the world has rarely known!

And according to Paul, all this CHARACTER *should* be propelling us ... like a swiftly flowing stream carries a fallen leaf ... directly to HOPE: to confidence ... to brighter horizons ... to relief, restoration and renewal. And, to be sure, it *is* ... but we *must* keep *reminding* ourselves that *biblical* HOPE *isn't* the HOPE of a pivotal swing in election outcomes ... or a percentage drop in inflation (or interest rates) ... or even an appreciable reduction in the likelihood of world conflict (take your pick as to the cause!). No, *that* HOPE is the HOPE for just a *baby*: for an infant to cuddle and spoil, to play with and sing to. For babies grow and change; sometimes they disappoint, and almost always, they leave home.

No, the HOPE Paul speaks of is the HOPE Sarah and Abraham have *not* for a momentary-*baby* named Isaac ... but for a forever-*nation* named *Israel*: for the realization of God's plan ... for the full flowering of God's love *of* us and our full embrace of God's devotion *to* us, as God's beloved creatures. ¶The HOPE of an Isaac, who will produce Jacob, who will produce twelve sons, who will produce a *nation*. ¶The HOPE of Jesus, Who will produce the sacrifice of the Cross, which will produce the salvation of humanity, which will produce eternal life for all who come to Him.<sup>7</sup> ¶The HOPE of the Holy Spirit, Who will flood the hearts of God's creatures with God's love, which will produce compassion, which will produce understanding, which will produce mutuality, which will produce sacrifice, which will produce peace, which will produce—at long last—Christ's kingdom, upon earth. HOPE isn't the *worried dream* that, *somehow*, we may ... but the *confident conviction* that, exactly as *promised*, God will.

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Paul's SUFFERING, ENDURANCE and CHARACTER we've got 'down,' I think ... we're tracking right along with him, all the way! What we must do to *complete* Paul's chain ... is, like Sarah ... lift our eyes from the 'baby' HOPE of what *we* desire from God ... to the 'nation' HOPE of what God desires *for us*, and for the whole world: the HOPE of love and compassion; of understanding and peace; of sharing and sacrifice; of compromise and collaboration. For when we have *true* HOPE—God's HOPE ... the *Christian* hope born of SUFFERING, ENDURANCE and CHARACTER ... then we're no longer HOPING for a *baby* who will grow and, soon enough, bring a whole *new* set of challenges ... but HOPING for the *seed* of God's *peace* ... which will grow and, in God's time, shade and shelter the whole *world* in its gracious and generous branches.

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<sup>7</sup> *I.e.*, in this life or the next, I always hasten to add, for I am *convinced* that Jesus will never stop asking anyone, this side of the veil or the other, whether they're ready to accept Him yet – for as long as it takes.