

Sermon - Proper 11, Year A
Romans 8:12-25
7/23/23

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

Since moving to Sister Bay back in April, I have been serving as a volunteer firefighter with the Sister Bay/Liberty Grove Department. One of the very first lessons I learned in firefighting seemed counterintuitive to me at the time. We were called to a brush fire just a mile or so north of here, and the lieutenant on scene hollered at our crew: “FIGHT FROM THE BLACK. FIGHT FROM THE BLACK.” It turns out that this is a basic tenet of wildland firefighting. Black ground is where all potential fuel has already been burned out. The holy trinity of fire’s ignition includes heat, oxygen, and fuel. If there is no fuel, there is no ignition. If the ground is black, there is no fuel, thus becoming the safest point from which a crew can approach an active burn.

And so we stood in the charred little pockets of woodland ash, negotiating the parched acres of an abandoned cherry orchard and lugging hose between the burnt up stumps. We followed the fire in the black of the burned underbrush. The wind was in our favor. Two hours later, we all went home – covered in ash, but successful and safe.

I don’t know why, precisely, it is always a lesson for newbies on a wildland call to remember to “stand in the black.” Intellectually, it is perfectly sensible. Heat, fuel, oxygen. “Deprived one, battle won.” But most newbies inevitably seem inclined to direct their footing toward the grass. The black ground looks frightening. It is what we have, in other circumstances, been trained to avoid. We recoil from devastation. We step back from the frightening places. They seem to be a site of danger. The children and the dogs are kept away.

But to fight a fire safely and with any degree of effectiveness requires the firefighter to stand in the black. It is the ugliest part of the scene, but it is the one where the necessary work can begin. It is the place of possibility. It is a place, oddly enough, of great hope.

I swore to myself that I would avoid using heavy-handed firefighting metaphors in sermons, but I have been unable to stop thinking about this one. St. Paul writes to the Romans, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.” He writes to a people who ache with longing. The social and political upheaval of the time had divided their community. Scholars contend that Paul’s letter was written somewhere between 55 and 57 AD. Just six or so years earlier, the Emperor, Claudius, issued an edict that expelled all Jews from Rome – and at this time, that included Christians. After Claudius died in the year 54, some of the expelled Jews and Christians returned, but this only heightened the chaos in the community. The ones who had left did not understand the pain of those who had stayed. The ones who stayed did not understand the pain of those who had left. Their beliefs had shifted. Their practices changed. Some people had died. And Rome itself was so diverse – so brimming with variety – that large questions emerged about who the Gospel was meant for. Were the Gentiles included? The women? The ones who had fallen away? And, most disturbing of all, what was to be made of the fact that Jesus himself had not yet returned?

“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.” Paul is doing several things within his epistle to the Romans, but beneath all of it, he is turning their hearts toward the most thoroughly difficult and vital of Christian virtues. He is insisting that they have hope. He speaks into the reality of their pain by pointing toward the eternal reality that it is indeed from this place of uncertainty that the genuine

work of transformation will begin. He is the fire officer – his voice ringing out over the burning field – “FIGHT FROM THE BLACK.”

Christians are people who are called to fight from the black. We are called to see with clear eyes and open hearts the pain of this very difficult, very complicated world, and not to run from it or try to hide it from view, but to *go into it* and join in the work of restoration. Our instincts are to run from pain or to avoid what looks like the burned out ash of possibility, but our faith demands otherwise. Paul reminds us that even as we “groan inwardly” – “in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” We don’t want to stand in the black, but when we do, we see that this is the place from which hope grows. We may not see it right away, but it is, in truth, the only place to begin.

It is Jesus himself who shows this to us. It is our Lord himself who went before us into the ultimate blackness of the tomb. He went before us into the darkest place – into death itself – a place which appeared to be burnt out, devastated, dangerous, a place of no return. And it was from this darkness that the only true source of our hope was grown. Jesus fought from the black.

This is worth remembering today, whether or not we find ourselves in charge of a fire crew. There is no shortage of frightening places. There is no shortage of frightening places even within ourselves. Our own hearts can become the wilderness, rich and strange and marked by ashen terrain that we would rather not visit again. But the assurances of Paul, our brother in the faith, are a word of grace for us. Stand in the black. Fight from it. Do not be afraid of what looks like death – for we are inheritors of a hope that was born in the darkness of a tomb. What seemed to be the end was only the beginning of a glory about to be revealed.

Amen.