



I want to tell you about a man named “Rob.” “Rob” was born in the closest city to where I grew up. After graduating from high school, he went onto Ohio State for marketing, but eventually ventured to the other side of Columbus to Trinity Lutheran Seminary, where he would soon enough become “Pastor Rob,” and served with many faith communities in the northwestern portion of this state, including one not too far from my home congregation. And so, I remember one Sunday morning when “Pastor Rob” was with *our* church leading the worship. I’m not sure why. Maybe there was a pulpit-swap going on that weekend just for something new, since we Lutherans obviously crave the new things as much as we possibly can.

Nevertheless, I distinctly remember “Pastor Rob” being there because, he was not the normal clergy I had experienced in my young life, as he walked in with this long ponytail. I should also mention that this was during my teenage years when I did not exactly pay attention to every sermon, to say the least, as if I had more important things to concern my mind with at the time. And yet, I can still remember “Pastor Rob’s” sermon, for starters, because he was the first one I saw *not* to preach from the pulpit. Not only that, but he had to be even more different than any other clergy (since, of course, we Lutherans thoroughly crave anything different than what we are used to): “Pastor Rob” threw a complete curveball at us when he asked all the choir members, who would always sit in the side pews behind the lectern and pulpit, to move to the front pews instead. “Pastor Rob” even had the most guts of all by asking the organist to leave her perch in the back corner and come sit in front of him as well. And it’s not that he was trying to be difficult with us routine-obsessed Lutherans. He wasn’t getting ready to show off his master sermon skills or something. You could just tell he wanted to look everyone in the eye for the Good News he was about to proclaim.

And as much as “Pastor Rob” had already thrown a completely monstrous wrench into our rote way of doing things, “Pastor Rob” was just getting started. Now I don’t remember exactly what he said at the start of his preaching, after he got the old school organist and choir members to begrudgingly move forward into the front pews. But even teenage self-driven me was taken aback by what he did next: he took off his alb and underneath was camouflage clothing, as he started talking about his military service in Vietnam. “Pastor Rob” was not the standard preacher by any stretch of the imagination, including not going the way I expected once he revealed his camo clothes.

He talked about his...not overly pleasant experience in war helping instill a passion for peace and tranquility and wholeness. Almost as if he had witnessed a piece of hell during that earlier time in his life, and he vowed to ensure that never happen for as many children of God who he could reach: not just in the sense of hopefully less conflicts between nations, but for our own personal struggles, and the hatred we far too often unleash on one another. His voice was calming, but also incredibly empowering, too: as if he wanted all of us to look into his eyes and be convinced that there was indeed this God of peace and tranquility and wholeness. There was indeed that God in this world, no matter how much rage continues amongst us individuals and entire countries. It’s a message that has certainly been proclaimed by pastors and non-clerics, for sure, but it stood out a bit more beautifully from “Pastor Rob,” who was not the run-of-the-mill clergy we Lutherans were used to by then.

Long ago, the apostle Paul didn't think he had the standard upbringing to proclaim that message of hope to children of God, but sometimes those who have experienced a dose of hell in their life in whatever form, have a way of instilling such a hope that will stick with the rest of us to the point that we will never forget it. They have a way of proclaiming the words that we heard from First Timothy this morning: "the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." Words that become even more powerful when they believe they went through a point in their journey with God when they thought were running on complete emptiness: wondering if there was any peace, any hope, any love for them.

"Pastor Rob" hit such a rock bottom, but somehow the love of Christ Jesus overflowed in him to the point that he could not help but share it with the rest of us. And yes, doing so in a way that we routine-obsessed Lutherans were not quite prepared for, but by God, we never forgot about it since. Eerily similar to Jesus Christ: making peace, hope and love come to life that humanity was not quite prepared for, to say the least, but by God, we cannot forget the grace that emerged in a carpenter's son of all people. And the Gospel remains that there is nothing that can happen in this life that will ever separate us from that boundless love of God in Christ Jesus, our still Risen Lord, now and forevermore. And for that Greatest News, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen.