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[All Scripture quotations are from the NIV, unless otherwise noted.]

Romans 5:1-5

Patrick's Story

The first summer that I lived in Michigan I dug a big garden in my back yard. Then a friend of mine showed up with a huge trailer full of sheep manure that she got from a farmer that she knew. I was a city girl. I had never encountered sheep manure before. It wasn't exactly something I went looking for. But, I tell you, that garden grew the best vegetables ever that summer: great big, juicy tomatoes; peppers; cucumbers; squash; and lots more. It turns out that, if you use it in the right way, sheep manure really helps good things grow.

At the beginning of Romans chapter 5, Paul writes: "We boast in the hope of the glory of God." That's a great line. It's encouraging and inspirational.

Paul continues to write: "Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings." That's a more troublesome line. C'mon, Paul, what are you trying to say? Are you trying to say that suffering is a good thing? To be honest, I don't think Paul is saying that suffering is a good thing, but I do think he's saying that suffering is not always an entirely bad thing.

Listen to what Paul writes next: "Suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."

Paul is still writing about hope. Suffering is not his main subject; hope is. Paul is saying that hope--hope that lasts, hope that is strong enough to carry us through the worst that life on this earth can throw at us, that kind of hope--is not acquired by accident. That kind of hope does not just implant itself in us while we are sleeping. We don't inherit it in our genes. We don't get it by swallowing a pill or reciting a prayer. That kind of hope--hope that lasts, hope that is strong enough to carry us through the worst that life on this earth can throw at us, hope that is rooted in the glory of God and not our own resources--that kind of hope is the product of fully-developed character that has been shaped by the Holy Spirit.

Holy-Spirit-shaped character is not acquired by accident. Just as muscles grow stronger only when they are challenged, character grows only when it is challenged. Perseverance, Paul says, is essential to the development of character.

Perseverance is, by definition, related to suffering. There is no need to persevere when the road is easy and the journey is pleasant. Perseverance is only needed when the road is difficult and the journey is marked by suffering.

Suffering is not, in and of itself, a good thing. Suffering is a lot like sheep manure. Suffering is unappealing and smelly and something most people would rather not step in. But suffering can, if it is used correctly, help good things grow. Suffering can be the muck that requires perseverance, the compost that nourishes the growth of character, and the manure that enriches hope...hope that lasts, hope that is strong enough to carry us through the worst that life on this earth can throw at us, hope that is rooted in the glory of God and not in our own resources.

It's hard to explain the connection between suffering and hope. Paul writes about it here like it's a mathematical equation: A leads to B, which leads to C, which leads to D. Easy.

It's not easy. And it usually isn't particularly logical. It doesn't make sense. But it does make a good story. And that's okay. Because our lives are not mathematical equations, our lives are stories.

Friday was St. Paddie's Day. Historically, St. Paddie's Day celebrates the life and ministry of Patrick, the first bishop of Ireland. Patrick's life makes a good story, full of suffering...and perseverance...and character...and hope.

First, let's clear up some common misconceptions about Patrick. (1) Patrick did not chase the snakes out of Ireland. Ireland was already snake-free and had been so since the last ice age. (2) Patrick is not really a capital-S Saint. Though he is known as the patron saint of Ireland, he was never actually canonized a Saint by the church. (3) Patrick was not Irish. He was born and grew up in Britain, in an area that is part of Scotland. (4) Patrick was not the first missionary sent by the church to Ireland. He was the second.

Patrick lived more than a thousand years before the Protestant Reformation, so--just like St. Patrick's Day belongs to all of us whether we are Irish or not--Patrick's story belongs to all of us whether we are Catholic or not. Patrick's story is a good one to remember during Lent. Patrick's story is a reminder that the Christian life is not about how following Jesus makes our lives easy but how following Jesus makes our lives meaningful.

Following Jesus doesn't mean only good things will happen to us. What it does mean is that Jesus will be present in all the things that happen to us, and that's a good thing.

Patrick's story has a lot to teach us...about overcoming tragedy, about listening to God, about humility, about self-sacrifice, about finding Christ in all things...about suffering, and perseverance, and character, and hope.

Patrick was born in Britain around 390 A.D. Patrick was of noble birth. His father was a public official. His family had a villa, land, servants, and slaves. Patrick's family was connected to the church, but Patrick himself was not religious and cared little for God or for the church.

At that time, Britain was then considered the outermost colony of the Roman Empire, at the edge of the civilized world. Ireland was beyond the edge of the civilized world...and beyond the reach of the church. From time to time, warriors from Ireland would sail across the Irish Sea in animal-skin boats to raid the British countryside. They burned villages, plundered estates, and captured slaves.

When Patrick was 16 years old, he became one of these captured slaves. He was taken back to Ireland, where he herded sheep, as a slave, for the next six years. His master, Milchu, was a chieftain. Some sources say he was a Druid priest.

As a slave in Ireland, Patrick rediscovered the faith of his family. He prayed. He prayed a lot. In his autobiography, which he wrote late in life, Patrick reports that he prayed "100 times a day, as many at night." Patrick developed a relationship with God through prayer. He became convinced of God's love and God's faithful protection. As he suffered, he learned perseverance. As he persevered, God developed his character. As his character was forming, hope was planted in his heart. He wouldn't always be a slave. He wouldn't always be herding sheep. But this relationship with God that formed while he was a slave herding sheep carried with him the rest of his life.

Patrick sometimes had visions, and messages often came to him in dreams. After he had been a slave for six years, one night, while he was fasting and praying, he heard a voice saying, "You have been right to fast because you will soon return to your home." Soon afterward Patrick received another message in a dream which said, "Look, your ship is ready."

Patrick interpreted this as a promise from God, and he resolved to escape. He walked 200 miles to the coast of Ireland. God kept Patrick safe from capture and certain death. Patrick found a ship that was departing Ireland for Britain with a cargo of dogs. The captain originally refused to have anything to do with Patrick. Patrick prayed, and eventually the captain changed his mind and allowed Patrick to board.

When the ship arrived at Britain, it struck land on a desolate part of the coast. Patrick and the crew wandered for 28 days before they finally found a village. Patrick survived this ordeal. He was now 22 years old, and he decided to become a priest. He studied, was ordained, and returned to his family in Britain where he lived in peace for about twenty years.

Then he had another one of his dreams. He heard a voice--the voice of the Irish--saying, "We pray thee, holy youth, come and walk among us once again." Patrick interpreted the dream as a call to return to Ireland. He set about getting assigned to be a missionary to Ireland.

The church sent somebody else, but he made little headway. A few years later, it was Patrick's turn.

Going to Ireland as a missionary was at least as dangerous as going there as a slave. The Celtic people who lived in Ireland were fierce, pagan warriors. There were numerous local chieftains and a class of Druid priests that were threatened by change. When Patrick returned to Ireland, he was risking his life. At any time, the chieftains, the Druids, or the common people could have turned against him and had him killed. Patrick later wrote: "Every day I expected either violent death or to be defrauded or to be reduced to slavery." He also wrote: "If I should be worthy, I am ready to give even my life unhesitatingly and most joyfully for his name's sake."

As a missionary, Patrick suffered years of tiring work, frequent threats to his life, hunger, persecution, and even a period of imprisonment with his legs in irons. Yet Patrick persevered the same way he had persevered through six years of slavery as a youth. Back then he had no choice, but God had used that time of perseverance to develop Patrick's character. Now he had a choice, and he chose to persevere, and God developed his character even more.

Patrick spent the last 29 years of his life in Ireland. When he arrived, there had been a few Christians in Ireland, a small, vulnerable, and threatened community. Three decades later, most of Ireland was Christian. Patrick himself baptized tens of thousands of people. Ireland became a bulwark of the faith. During the Dark Ages, British Christians used to send their sons to Ireland to get a good foundation for the Christian life.

There are many admirable characteristics to this man. He didn't give up in the face of suffering, danger, or betrayal. He was faithful in prayer. He responded to the guidance of God. He was humble and sincere and willing to sacrifice himself for others. He was able to forgive even when harmed.

But most of all, he looked for Christ in all things. Patrick found something of Christ in everything, even in his suffering...and his suffering produced perseverance...which produced character that shaped by the Holy Spirit...which became fertile ground for hope...the kind of hope that lasted, the kind of hope that carried him through the worst that life on this earth threw at him, the kind of hope that trusted in the glory of God.

Amen.