

Romans 5: 1-5
"Oscar Swag"
March 3, 2019
Rev. Lou Nyiri

Only a handful of people can win Oscars every year, but have no fear because when they say, "it's just an honor to be nominated" if you're one the night's most high-profile nominees you also get to take home a gift bag so luxurious it's sure to soften the blow you don't get to take home a coveted golden statue.

This year's gift bag includes a plethora of gifts from chocolates to international expeditions to color-changing lipstick. The bags are created by the Los-Angeles based marketing company Distinctive Assets, and MONEY [dot com]'s best estimate puts their cost at more than \$100,000 worth of freebies and goodies. (Distinctive Assets is separate from the Academy, which does not sponsor these bags and has actively worked to distance itself from them.)

Companies pay a minimum of \$3,000 to be included in the glitzy gift bags, Distinctive Assets tells MONEY, but the kind of brand recognition they can get from the exposure is priceless.

The six-figure gift bags are delivered to their recipients a week before the big night, but they are only given out to a handful of the nominees in the most visible Oscar categories: Best Actor/Actress, Best Supporting Actor/Actress and Best Director.

This means that everyone from Lady Gaga, Melissa McCarthy and Glenn Close to Rami Malek, Mahershala Ali and Spike Lee got to enjoy the pricey goodies.

They are affectionately called the "Everyone Wins" Nominee Gift Bags.¹

Things have inflated over the years, in fact back in 2003 the price tag on the gift basket topped only \$20,000.00 – I know that's still a lot – but don't forget this year's came in at about \$100,000.00.

And "no" this isn't a sermon on the ills of celebrity extravagance – I think we all get that after this past week's baseball news surrounding Bryce Harper's trade from the Washington Nationals to the Philadelphia Phillies – and yes, that might be more a jealousy statement on my part that Harper didn't go to The New York Mets. But, I digress, because this sermon is about one of the nicest gifts in the 2003 Oscar Swag basket ~ a three night, dinner for two plus couples spa treatment at the then newly opened luxury resort in Cabo San Luca, Mexico – *The Esperanza*.

Esperanza – the name rolls off the lips with elegance and beauty.

¹ Taken from: <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/2019-oscars-swag-bags-pot-110042668.html>

Esperanza – a 56 room luxury hotel situated in an incomparable natural setting with spacious rooms which open to reveal sweeping ocean views.

Esperanza – was the highest valued gift in the 2003 Academy Award gift basket with a price tag of \$3,000.00.

Esperanza – it sure sounds wonderful.

And it is. Because, Esperanza is the Spanish word for HOPE.

And HOPE does not disappoint us!

No one knew this HOPE better than the Apostle Paul.

He wrote some of the greatest words on HOPE in his letter to the Roman church.

Paul opens this chapter with a characteristically dense statement on a past event – it contains a present result & a future promise.

The past event is our reconciliation with God - “since we are justified by faith...”

Paul reminds us that our reconciliation with God is nothing we strive for; rather it is something ‘we have received.’

What we do with that reconciliation though is up to us.

It’s like the great birth statement, “Life is God’s gift to us...What we do with our lives is our gift back to God.”

This past event leads us into a present reality, namely – PEACE.

Paul reveals to his Roman audience a different kind of peace – one that is founded in a different Lord & a different God.

To help understand this kind of peace, Paul uses the cultic sacrificial language which surrounds him.

When he speaks of us “obtaining access” to grace, Paul is using the same type of language the people of his day would use to describe approaching the altar with a sacrifice.

What he speaks of is entirely different – it’s not approaching God to win God’s favor – it’s approaching God through an intermediary – one who has already won God’s favor on our behalf.

This grace metaphor of which Paul writes paints a picture of grace as more than simply a state of mind – grace is more like a room into which Jesus ushers all who believe.

It is the room in which we now stand.

It is a place characterized by the presence and sustaining love of God.

As the Temple symbolized and actualized Israel’s meeting with the gracious God, so now Jesus has made possible such a meeting between this same God and all who approach by faith.

Scottish theologian & New Testament interpreter, William Barclay, has said of this passage, “It’s as if Paul was saying, ‘Jesus ushers us into the very presence of God. Jesus opens the door for

us to the presence of the King of Kings; and when that door is opened what we find is grace; not condemnation, not judgment, not vengeance, but the sheer, undeserved, incredible kindness of God.” (The LETTER to the Romans, p. 73)

This past justification & the present status of grace is for Paul, and for us, the future HOPE for all who believe. And we are to boast in this HOPE.

But why would we boast?

Isn't boasting rude?

Isn't boasting a form of self-advertisement?

Don't NFL referees throw flags on excessive celebrations after touchdowns?

Don't we tell our children "stop showing off?"

According to contemporary society, boasting is quite distasteful.

For Paul, however, boasting has a larger significance.

It's not about grandstanding or showing off.

Boasting is about having a confident basis when facing life's *known* present & *unknown* future.

Boasting isn't about celebrating – it's about marrying joy & confidence together.

We boast in the HOPE we have of sharing in God's glory through Jesus Christ.

HOPE is not unfounded for it is empowered by the Holy Spirit – Paul tells us, “[the Holy Spirit] has poured God's love into our hearts.”

It is this HOPE in the confidence and joy of God's undying love and care for the creation which sees us through despairing moments.

Life has a way of teaching us some disappointing lessons.

Early on it's usually about something you want...later it's usually about something you've lost or are in the process of losing.

Anyone who has put any amount of time into living knows that life is not always easy.

Children die before parents.

Spouses betray wedding vows.

Teenagers get pregnant before marriage.

Loved ones move in and out of our lives.

The doctor calls and we get life-changing news.

Life isn't always sunshine and flowers or chocolates and expensive getaways.

Sometimes it's dark clouds and rainy weather.

The reality of living is that life is hard.

To say otherwise, I believe, would be an outright lie – at the very least overlooking reality.

However, in spite of life's hard living, as people of faith we have HOPE in a God who loves us unconditionally, who is good and who will not abandon us.

The paradox of Christian faith is that we can have hope in the good times and in the bad times. Paul knew this to be true.

Paul spoke of it as remembering that even in our suffering the story ends with HOPE.

It doesn't make sense.

While it doesn't make sense, it does produce the endurance we need to keep pace with life's ups and downs.

How often have you heard it said or spoke these words yourself, "I don't know how people without faith can get through something like this?"

Hope is a message the world needs to hear.

Hope is contagious.

[9:30 a.m. worship]

In the movie, Letters to God, a young boy fighting cancer writes letters to God. These letters touch the lives of those in his neighborhood and community. He inspires hope in everyone he meets. An unsuspecting substitute postman, with a troubled life of his own, becomes entangled in the boy's journey and his family by reading the letters. The letters inspire this postman to seek a better life for himself and his own son whom he lost through his own alcohol addiction. Let's watch...[show clip]...

Hope helps us to see that there's more to this life than we could see.

Hope helps us to sense faith – even amid turbulent times.

Hope helps us to know that life's outcome is based not solely on us and our own doing, rather on something greater than us.

Hope reminds us that we can be fulfilled!

That we will survive!

HOPE does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Amen and Amen.