



In this world you will have trouble. How true; how painfully obvious. Only two years into my call at Trinity and many of you have met with me to talk about just that – your troubles. This is not surprising, for a myriad of reasons, but chief among them is that the Lord tells us as much. In this world you will have trouble.

“The world is a thistle head”, Martin Luther has said:

It sticks you no matter which way you turn it. It is made up of a large mass of people who do not fear God, who do not trust or love or praise or thank him, who misuse all creatures, who blaspheme his name, who despise his word, who are disobedient, who are murderers, adulterers, thieves and rogues, liars, traitors full of unfaithfulness and all manners of evil tricks, transgressors of all commandments, rebels and opponents in all things, clinging to the enemy the wretched devil.

Luther won't sugar-coat it. In the world you will have trouble. How true and downright obvious. No matter your age or station, you can easily observe that this dead and dying world is full of trial and tribulation.

The Hofmann family farm in south Texas illustrates this sobering message to us this morning: in the world, you will have trouble. The south Texas landscape is hard and unforgiving. Everything on this earth that wants to poke you, sting you, bite you lives there. Trouble and tribulation has eight legs, six legs and no legs. Trouble and tribulation are in the dirt, in the barn, under the old tin, and (hopefully not but probably) is somewhere in the cabin. Trouble and tribulation will find its way into anything and everything. There is no greater terror than crawling into the deer blind at 6am, getting comfortable and turning on your flash light and seeing the ceiling crawling with yellow jackets. When its cold enough you can just go one by one with your knife. Emphasis on the when its cold enough in south Texas.

And not just the creepy crawlies; there is a great variety of troublesome plants in my beloved patch of land. There is the long, pointy yucca plant whose leaves are like spears. They will poke through your wranglers and draw blood. There is the prickly pear cactus. This is the cactus that illustrates that south Texas charm. Its big green leaves make for great target practice. But you better hope your dead dove doesn't land in that thing (best loved from a distance I guess). Then there are the thorn bushes that will murder your tires. It was always a struggle to go dove hunting with Papa. When driving up the lane, we would stop at every thorn bush and treat it with the diesel-fuel-remedy concoction. Are we hunting or are we brush clearing? But Papa was right to stop and treat and clear the lane. Clearing brush is constant. Caring for the farm is never ending. Yucca, cactus, thorns will always be there. It is a bit ironic – the thicker the brush gets, the better the deer hunting is.

The land of south Texas is wild and unforgiving. It's hard. It's hot. It's full of trials and tribulation and yet I love it to my core. It is difficult to explain, this love affair I have with our small south Texas family farm. Why would anyone love a place like that? Why would anyone embrace the trouble? Perhaps it is because it showcases this troublesome world in which we live.

Perhaps it tests my metal. Perhaps it is the nostalgia mixed with the self-described exceptionalism; the it's not for everyone mentality. Perhaps it reminds me of who I am – just another poor soul about to be stung, poked or bit by the troublesome creation of south Texas – just another poor soul pilgriming through a troublesome world. In this world, you will have trouble, Jesus says. In this world, you will experience tribulation, distress, affliction and all kinds of pressures, simply because that's the way this world is.

My dad has been working on a book for a few years; now that he is retired, he might actually have time to finish it. It is on leadership, and how suffering – especially – molds us into leaders. Most of us would agree that one does not ascend to leadership without some kind of suffering, trials or tribulation. Most of us would agree that the best leaders are those who paid their way in blood, sweat and tears. The farm in south Texas might have had some influence, as dad's main metaphor is how farmers, ranchers, land owners care for their land. Caring for land – whether its clearing and burning mesquite or mowing a suburban lawn – is constant. The job never ends. Nature never gives up. Nature never relents. Nature is never defeated. The farmer, the rancher is always fighting a battle. And probably more often than not, he is fighting a losing battle. The farmer is always working to maintain at least a semblance of order. The rancher walks that line between order and chaos, often tripping into chaos. The land is never defeated. The stingers, pricklers, biters and pokers are always around. And if we manage to clear them today, they will return tomorrow.

Now looking beyond the Hofmann farm in south Texas and into the whole world, we could ask the same questions. Who would love such a place? Who would endeavor to embrace all the trouble? And to steal my dad's metaphor: What crop could possibly grow here? This world is trouble. True and immediately obvious. Worse things than prickly pear, mesquite and rattlesnakes frequent this world. And yet, into this world, God sent his Son. And he was not just sent, but he was born into this world, raised in this world, lived in this world and experienced every manner of trial and tribulation in this dead and dying world. In the midst of all the thistles and deer-blind-dwelling yellow jackets, God raised up a Savior. Who would love such a place of south Texas? But better yet and better gospel is: Who would love such a world? The gospel, indeed: For God so loved this troubled world, that he sent his Son. Very true and very good to believe. But unfortunately, not always immediately apparent and obvious. Sometimes God's love for this world can seem overshadowed by the tribulation we face. Sometimes the trouble seems to crowd out our hope. Sometimes it is difficult to have love in this world, let alone believe in the God of love whose love had him born into this world.

But we read a page out of dad's book. All the suffering and all the trouble has its place. For it is in these moments where these gospel words from John 16 find us. It is in our trouble when our faith shines the brightest. It is in our tribulation when God's salvation rings the clearest. It is when we are fallen to a bended knee, defeated, torn down, humiliated by the world do we see our God as the crucified and risen Savior. The unbelievable truth is that God loves this troubled world. The inconceivable gospel is that God loves your troubled lives. And with the blood of his Son, he has redeemed your troubled marriage, your troubled career, your troubled family. All of the drama, consternation, anxiety and worry of this world was crucified with Jesus and buried in the grave. But only hope, truth and love rose from the dead.

Who would die for a prickly-pear cactus? Who would die for a ceiling covered in yellow jackets? Who would die for the rattlesnake coiled under the yucca? The Lord Jesus would; and he has. For you, whose troubles are far worse than that of the hard, hot landscape of south Texas; whose sins are far deadlier than rattlesnake; whose blights are uglier than the pokey yucca; for you

Christ has come; Christ has died; and Christ is risen from the dead. This dead and dying world, full of sin and shame, has been defeated. Order is restored. Truth is victorious. You are redeemed. Will there be a south Texas landscape in the new creation? I don't know. But this much I do know – as much as I love the Hofmann farm, I already also love the world prepared and truly coming with my Lord. In this world, you will have trouble. A word of warning, preceding a word of promise. But take heart, I have defeated the world. Death is defeated. Sins are forgiven, in the name of Jesus Christ

Amen.