



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Groaning

Romans 8:18-25

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Have you ever travelled to someplace unfamiliar and struggled to figure out how to get from one part of town to another because the streets didn't seem to make any sense? When Veronica and I were getting married I went Bellingham to see if I could find a job to which I could commute from Vancouver. Aside from driving through on Interstate 5, I'd never been there before and as I drove around the city I found it incredibly confusing. One place I visited told me I should apply at a computer store owned by their parent company. The woman gave me directions, which I tried to follow. I was pretty quickly lost and gave up. I think it was a miracle that on my way home at the end of the day I just happened to drive by the store as I was trying to find my way back to the freeway from the downtown area. When I started working in Bellingham, I found it confusing that every part of town was laid out on a grid, but the grid changed every so often. I also found that getting from one part of town to another was often difficult unless you knew the main routes that connected the different grids and that made their way around the hills that divided up the city.

One day our service manager invited me to his house for lunch. He lived on one of the hills that make up the eastern boundary of the city. At the top of the hill he pulled over and we got out of the car. From there you could see most of Bellingham. From that vantage point, being able to see everything below, it all made sense. He explained that there were originally four small towns built on the bay. They had eventually grown together. That, the curve of the bay,

and the hills that pop up every so often explained why each part of town had a street grid oriented its own way. You could also see how many of the through streets that had once connected everything had been severed when they built Interstate 5. From that vantage point up on the hill the town suddenly made sense to me and, from that point on, I found it much easier to find my way around.

This morning we'll be looking at Romans 8:17-25. It does for the first half of Romans what that hillside vantage point did for Bellingham. From here we can look back and see where Paul has been headed with his argument so far and we can also see ahead to where he's going. But it's not just Paul's letter that we see from up here. Paul really does take us to Scriptural vantage point from which we can see all of redemptive history laid out below us. It's a view we need to take in.

I'm convinced that most Christians—even though they may know the Bible very well—know its parts in much the same way that I knew Bellingham. There's Creation over here, then there's the Fall, then there's Abraham's story, the Exodus over there, the story of Joshua and the conquest of Canaan. There's Solomon and then there's David and then the divided kingdom, all the kings, and the prophets. There's the exile and then the return from exile. And then there's Jesus and the book of Acts and finally John's Revelation with a bunch of epistles in between. We know the *parts*. But if we even bother to try putting them together, it's a struggle—to see how this street grid connects to the next and how we get from one end of town—Genesis—to the other end—Revelation. Over these last eight chapters of Romans, Paul's been showing how these various Old Testament streets are connected to and lead to Jesus the Messiah, but here he gives us a glimpse of the big picture and we see how Genesis is connected to Revelation—or, it would probably be better to say, since Revelation had

been written yet—we see how we get from Creation to New Creation.

In the last paragraph—the passage we looked at last week—Paul wrote that wonderful description of the life of the Spirit. If we are in Jesus the Messiah, the Holy Spirit is in us. As Jesus is God's Son, if we are in him, that makes us his brothers and sisters, God's adopted sons and daughters. And the Spirit, renewing our minds and regenerating our hearts, assures us of this. And, Paul stressed, because we are God's sons and daughters, the inheritance promised to Jesus is our inheritance too. Yes, we suffer in the present age, but the age to come is breaking in and our suffering only serves to remind us of our solidarity with Jesus. As he was raised by the Spirit, so the same Spirit, poured into us in our baptism, will one day raise us. We live with the hope of glory.

But what does “glory” mean? This is what Paul explains here and it's something we need to hear. It's a shame that more Christians don't pause here at the top of Romans 8 to take in the view, because if we did, it would correct one of the most common errors in Western theology—by Western I mean the Roman and Protestant churches. I've said before that in the era of the Church Fathers, the pagan philosophy of Neoplatonism infiltrated Christian thinking. On the positive side, it gave us the philosophical vocabulary the Church needed to hammer out the important doctrines expressed in the Creeds, but on the negative side, it introduced the very pagan idea that the physical or material world is bad and that the goal of redemption is to be freed from the body to enjoy a purely spiritual existence. In the Hebrew and early Christian thought matrix, the goal of redemption was Creation made new and set to rights and God's people ruling it as Adam did in the beginning. The salvation of men and women was one part of that—certainly the most important part—but still *part* of it. Jews and Christians lived in hope of being resurrected from the dead—just

as Jesus was—and understood that when it happened, all of Creation would be set to rights. All of the corruption and sorrow it was subjected to because of our sin would be undone. Creation was good—*very* good, in fact—because God made it that way, and his plan was to fix what we had messed up. That also meant that, in the meantime, God’s people are always called to work towards that setting right—whether that’s being good stewards of Creation or living out the life of the Spirit so that others can see what God intended when he created human beings in his image.

But—and here’s the problem—a worldview that was more Neoplatonist than it was biblical gradually took over during the Patristic era. Creation was bad. Even our human bodies are bad. And the goal became one of escape. Jesus redeems us so that when we die we can escape the “flesh” and be freed into a spiritual existence in heaven. We’ve all encountered this idea. It’s everywhere, whether in the popular “heaven tourism” books or in many of the songs we sing. It’s the idea that this world is not our home and that we’re just passing through on our way to heaven. In the process, this Creation that God created good is written off as, at least irrelevant, if not simply as “bad”, and the true Christian hope of resurrection and human beings and the world restored to the way and the purpose for which God made them is abandoned and lost. To be with Jesus while we await the resurrection and restoration of all things—something only just touched on in the Bible as an intermediate consolation—is inflated and thought to be the Christian’s final hope.

So, in verse 18, Paul picks up the idea of suffering again. We all experience suffering in this world—some more than others. Paul had in mind the persecution that his fellow Christians had been and would suffer at the hands of the Jews and the Romans.

But whatever the suffering, he puts it in perspective. He writes:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

First, he “considers”. This is that bookkeeping word again. He’s thought it through, he’s done the math, this is the logical conclusion of the story of redemption and especially of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Whatever suffering God’s people are facing or are about to face, it simply cannot compare with the glory it’s going to give way to. We live in the overlap of the ages. The present evil age is passing away. God’s new age to come is breaking in, but it hasn’t been consummated yet. Why did God choose to bring redemption this way? He did it so that the wicked might repent. He did it to give his enemies an opportunity to end their rebellion and change sides, rather than simply swooping in and consigning everyone to destruction. But while this happens, in the overlap of the ages, the people committed to the old way of doing things are hostile to the people of the new age, the people of God’s kingdom. Sin and death have been defeated by Jesus, Caesar, Mammon, Mars, Aphrodite—the gods of the old age—have been exposed as false. Jesus is Creation’s true Lord and that’s what we proclaim, but there are still a lot of people committed to Caesar and Mammon and Aphrodite and they don’t want to hear our announcement of good news. For them, it means the end of everything they hold dear. They will fight back. But the good news is that the good news really is good news. Jesus really is Lord. The present evil age really is passing away. God’s kingdom really is coming and will, when everything is ready, come in all its fullness to crush its enemies. And that means that glory will be revealed to us. The sense isn’t just of something we’ll see, as if we’ll be spectators. The Greek word has the

sense of this glory being revealed *towards* or *into* us. Think of this idea of inheritance. Inheritance isn’t something someone else gets that you only get to look at. It’s given to you and it becomes yours. This is why Paul refers to the “sons of God in verses 19, where he writes:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.

The glory to be revealed is the revealing of the sons and daughters of God. It’s the children of God coming into our inheritance. And what is that? Well, this idea of creation waiting with eager longing—Bp. Wright puts it dramatically, but accurately, as “creation itself on tiptoe with expectation”—this idea points us in the right direction. Creation has been missing something. And this is where, to understand what Paul is saying, we need to have a good sense of the Bible’s big picture of creation. This is what Paul’s getting at in verses 20-22.

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.

Creation is in bondage. And it’s not Creation’s fault. It’s ours. Paul points us back to Genesis 3. When Adam and Eve sinned, they were cast out of the garden. They were forced to leave the presence of God and that meant that they began to die. Human beings ever since have been subject to death because we are subject to sin. But our sin has ramifications for the rest of Creation. The curse of Genesis 3 puts it in terms of the ground being cursed—no more would it easily yield its fruit. Adam would have to fight thorns and thistles and would eat by

the sweat of his brow. Eve was cursed with the pain of childbirth. Christians disagree on whether Genesis 3 is literal or metaphorical, but the point is that Creation is not as it should be, because human beings have rebelled against God and abandoned our vocation as his representative and stewards of Creation. We were created for a priestly role and called to serve in his temple, but we seized the temple for ourselves and made a mess of it. Ever since, Creation has groaned with longing to be set right. Eve may have been cursed with pain in childbirth, but Creation, as it has longed to be born anew, groans with her—longing to once again have its stewards exercising true and faithful stewardship. And with the resurrection of Jesus the King, the forces that will make Creation new have been unleashed and Creation now waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons and daughters of God—for Jesus and his people to come into their inheritance, to take their place once again as God’s good rulers, as the faithful priests who will care for the temple.

But why? Paul writes about Creation being subjected to futility. Why? Well, he moves from Genesis to Exodus now. God took Israel to Egypt and allowed his people to become slaves so that his glory would be revealed when he delivered them and so that Israel would forever be known among the nations as the people freed from bondage. In the same way, God has subjected Creation to bondage—to the results of human sin and our often abusive stewardship. But at the same time, God has been working to bring salvation to all of Creation. We see it in his promises to Abraham. Through Abraham and through his children, the knowledge of God would be restored to a rebellious humanity that had all but forgotten him.

At the very beginning, human beings were put in charge of Creation. Pagans put images of stone, wood, or

metal in their temples to represent the presence and rule of their gods in those places. But when God created his temple—that’s what the Cosmos is, with the Garden of Eden as a sort of holy of holies—he placed Adam in that temple, to be his representative, to rule and to steward his Creation, to serve in his presence. That’s what it means to be bearers of God’s image. But as Paul pointed out back in Romans 1:21-23, human beings rebelled. Instead of worshipping the Creator, we worshipped the creation. We worshipped the sky, the sea, the earth, even our fertility as gods. We worshipped money, and power, and sex. We saw the beauty of Creation and worshipped it instead of the God who created it. And Creation became a slave to our infidelity and idolatry. God allowed Creation to be subjected to futility, because he was determined to set it to rights—to put it back on track in accordance with his original plan. *This is how God works:* He doesn’t change his plans; he redeems the people who make a mess of them so that he can put them back on track. Think of Israel. When she failed to be the people God called her to be, God didn’t change his plan, he didn’t choose a new people. No, he sent a faithful Israelite—Jesus—to accomplish the task the people had rejected and to restore the people. But Jesus is more than just the faithful Israelite. He is also the faithful human being, the faithful Adam, who will faithfully bear the image of God, justly and wisely ruling and stewarding God’s creation—and, as Paul writes, as Jesus redeems and restores us, we will share in this inheritance of ruling—being restored to the life and vocation for which God made us.

God’s plan from the beginning has been for human beings to be his image bearers—submitting to him, while governing the world; worshipping the Creator, while stewarding his Creation.

Some translations have verse 21 saying that Creation is waiting to share in the freedom of God’s children, but that’s not quite it. Paul’s point is that Creation is waiting eagerly for we human beings to be set free, put right, and restored to our role as God’s image bearers, because only then will Creation itself be set right. It was corrupted because of our rebellion and it will be through our restoration that Creation will be made right.

Creation longs for this, but what about us? Look at verses 23-25:

And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

The Church groans along with the Creation, longing to be made new ourselves. We look forward to that day when, as we follow Jesus, our bodies will be resurrected to the life of the age to come. There’s an already-but-not-yet aspect to our redemption. If we have submitted in faith to the crucified and risen Lord, we’ve been redeemed. Paul will even say in verse 30 that we have been glorified—*past tense*. But we await the final consummation of all this. But as he has said before, the gift of the Spirit is the firstfruits—that first part of the harvest, taken in at the beginning of the season as the farmer looked forward to the full harvest to come. We are, in Christ, God’s sons and daughters, but we await the fullness of our inheritance. We have a calling here and now to bear God’s image in the power of the Spirit, but we know that the full glory of our restoration as rulers of Creation still lies in the future. But because of the gift of the Spirit, you and I have assurance.

What God has begun in us, he will, without a doubt, complete.

Brothers and Sisters, we live in hope. We repented and trusted in Jesus in hope. And we groan with the pains and sufferings of this life in hope, knowing that the God who is faithful to his promises will bring our salvation to completion. The Christian life is a life of hope from beginning to end. And since hope is always built on what we cannot see, Paul's point is that the Christians life is one lived in the midst of pain, suffering, and trials as we struggle and press forward to that which is unseen—to the fulfilment of God's promises. The real sense of verse 25 is hard to catch in English. It speaks of waiting with patience, because we know that our hope will certainly be fulfilled, but the word Paul uses for "wait" is a word that expresses eagerness. It's almost an oxymoron. Literally, in Greek, it's something like "through patience, eagerly await". We hope for what we cannot see, but because we know the character of God. Because we know that he is righteous beyond all measure. Because we know that he is good and he keeps his covenant promises. Because of that, we wait with a steady patience while still straining forward in excited expectation. We live with the birth pangs of Creation giving birth to New Creation. When the present suffering is over, Jesus will wipe away every tear and pain and suffering will be no more. The King will have come into his inheritance and, with his people at his side, will set Creation to rights.

But think about what that means for us today, here in the overlap of the ages. We are people of Jesus the King. We are people indwelt and transformed by his Spirit. We are people in whom the works of the flesh—the works that have made a mess of Creation and human relationships—have been put to death. Instead, grafted into Jesus, the living vine, we bear the fruit of the Spirit. Brothers and Sisters, the

Church is called to share the pain of the world in hope as we bring love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control to bear in the midst of its problems. It's sad that as God's people, we sometimes forget who we are and what we've been called to do. We're too often guilty of contributing to the suffering and the pain, to the breaking of relationships and the abuse of Creation when we should be bringing the healing and restoring power of the Spirit to bear on life around us. Thanks be to God that he doesn't give up. Thanks be to God that we have assurance, by the indwelling of his Spirit and by the cross and empty tomb. We know that he does not abandon his people, but will set us right and with us, all of Creation. Dear Friends, live in the Spirit. Bear his fruit in abundance and bring it to the world. And in the midst of pain and suffering, amidst the crumbling temples of the old gods, amidst the futile rebellion of humanity, proclaim with faith-filled hope, proclaim with eager expectation, that Jesus, our crucified and risen Lord, is King and that all who trust in him, who repent and give him their allegiance will be forgiven, renewed, and have a place in his New Creation.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, through the death and resurrection of your Son you have redeemed us. By your Holy Spirit you have given us life and an eager hope for the age to come. Cause us now to bear good fruit for the sake of the world, that we might bring the healing and restoration of your kingdom to a world full of suffering and pain. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.