



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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The Fourth Sunday after Trinity: Suffering and Glory Romans 8:17-23 Fr. William Klock

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On Monday I rode by gravel bike up Horne Lake Forest Service Road, up from the lake towards Port Alberni. It's a big loop through the forests and mountains—basically the middle of nowhere. Before I left I created route using an app on my phone and then I made sure the map was loaded. And by the time I got to Horne Lake there was no cell service, somehow the map “unloaded” itself, and all I had was a blank map with a blurry red line for the road and my little blue GPS dot telling me where I was on it. None of the sideroads or trails were showing, none of the topographical lines were showing. I didn't know how far I was from the top or where to turn, all I could do after every junction was to check to make sure the little blue dot was still on the blurry red line and if, it wasn't, turn around and go the other way and check again. And then on my way down cell service returned, the map loaded, and right when I needed my GPS the most, it stopped working. The map showed the road crossing Nile Creek, but when I got there I found a ravine about sixty feet deep and the bridge missing. I couldn't tell if I was on the right road or how far off course I might end up when I went bushwhacking down a deer trail to see if I could find a place to cross. The whole time I was thinking how much more reliable it was in the old days with a topographic map and a compass. Having that little “You are here” dot isn't much good if you don't have a map for reference. And having a map isn't very helpful if you don't know where you are on it. That—and some conversations I've had the last few weeks with other pastors—got me

thinking about how we read the Bible and do theology and all of that. It reminded me why I like what's called narrative theology and why I think it's important to always be telling the big biblical story. The biblical story is the map. Narrative theology shows us where we are on the map. Both keep us firmly grounded in the story of God and his people.

We need that. We grow up learning all the stories, but the Bible story book we read as kids—or read to our kids—often leave us with the stories disconnected. We end up knowing Adam and Abraham and Moses and Jesus, but we struggle to know how their stories are related and part of the bigger story. And that often continues on as adults. And we struggle to know where we fit in to it.

I say this because our Epistle from Romans 8 this morning is one those wonderful, short passages that puts a map in front of us. It shows us the big picture of the good news, of God's redemption and renewal of humanity and of his entire Creation. And it says, “You are here”. Our Epistle this morning is St. Paul leading us right to the climax of his letter to the Romans and here he shows us the map: where we've come from, where we're going, how it all fits together.

In the first half of Romans, Paul works his way through the story of Israel and all her ups and downs—and for Israel things were mostly “down”. And now in Chapter 8 he begins talking about life in the flesh versus life in the Spirit and the law of sin and death versus the law of the Spirit. This is where, in verse 11, he famously writes that if the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead lives in us, the One who raised Jesus from the dead will also give life to our mortal bodies—if we are in Jesus the Messiah we live in hope of the same resurrection he has experienced. But even more than that, Paul goes on to write, through our union with Jesus we are children and heirs of God, fellow heirs with Christ—that means *sharing in Jesus' inheritance*. But what is

that? Paul writes in verse 17 that it means to suffer with him so that we can be glorified with him. The Christian life—life with Jesus—for Paul means two things: suffering and glory. Suffering is a given as we long for glory.

Most Christians living through the last two thousand years have understood that suffering is part of our calling as we follow Jesus. Jesus promised it. The New Testament writers talk about it often—and most of them faced it themselves and were martyred for proclaiming the lordship of Jesus. Many of our brothers and sisters today are persecuted for their faith in various parts of the world. And yet in the West—probably in part because we haven't faced persecution for such a long time—many Christians have no place for suffering in their theology. Some even go so far as to say that if you're experiencing suffering—sickness, poverty, rejection or anything else negative—it's due to a lack of faith. But that's just the opposite of what Jesus taught and it's just the opposite of what Paul teaches here. The inheritance we share with Jesus is one of suffering that leads to glory. What this means is at the centre of our Epistle and Paul goes on in verse 18:

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

Are you suffering? Paul shows the little blue you-are-here GPS dot on the map. This is us. Here's where we're at in the big picture, the big story. And Paul says, “For I consider...” That doesn't mean this is his opinion. He's put his compass on the map and lined everything up and here's where it points to and here's where we are. Knowing the Scriptures, knowing Jesus, working under the Spirit's inspiration, this is the only conclusion he can reach. He's been building this argument for eight chapters in Romans and here he reaches the inevitable conclusion: those who will be

glorified will first face suffering, *but* that this suffering can't begin to compare with the glory to be revealed.

Think about what a powerful statement this was when Paul wrote it. When he writes that word "suffering" most of us probably read into it whatever our own trials and tribulations are. That's fine. But what did Paul have in mind? Later in the chapter, in verses 35-36 he writes that nothing will separate us from the love of Christ—*nothing*—and then he goes on to detail the sorts of suffering that he and other Christians were facing—things people might think mean that God doesn't love them, things they might think show a lack of faith, things that might separate them from Jesus. Here's his list: hardship or distress, persecution or famine, nakedness or peril or sword. And he quotes from Psalm 44: "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted sheep to be slaughtered." These things are far worse than the sorts of suffering most of us are likely to face. And as horrible as this suffering was, none of it could compare with the glory to be revealed—no amount of suffering could make the glory not worth it.

But what is the glory Paul's writing about? Our translation says that this glory is to be revealed "to us". By that he doesn't mean that it's God's show-and-tell, that we'll be spectators to this glory. It means that we have a share in it. Think of this glory as a gift given to us by God. Remember what Paul said before: that if we are in Christ, then we will share in his inheritance—we will *participate* in his inheritance.

And what's the inheritance? Well, who is Jesus? He is Lord. His glory is revealed or it's unveiled in his glorious and sovereign rule of Creation and Paul is saying here that the glory we wait for with eager longing, the glory that is the basis for our hope as Christians is not glory in the sense many people often think.

We often think of "glory" as a place or a state of being. When a Christian dies we often hear people say that he or she has gone on or been promoted to "glory". Brothers and Sisters, "glory" is more than just going to heaven when you die. As Jesus' glory is his sovereign rule over Creation, so the glory to be revealed in us is our participation, our sharing in the sovereign and saving rule of Jesus. Glory is about the resurrection of the dead and all of creation one day set to rights. And this is why he says what he does in verse 19:

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

Brothers and Sisters, God's Creation is waiting for the great day when its true rulers will be revealed, the sons of God, and when it will be delivered from corruption. Look at 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.

This is where we need to stand back and look at the big picture. Everything Paul's saying here is dependent on that. It's the big picture the Bible gives of us of God's Creation, from beginning to end. We read in Genesis that God created and that everything was good. We even read there that when he created human beings he looked at his handiwork and declared us not just "good", but "very good". But we look around us now and have to wonder what happened. War is always raging somewhere, there's violence everywhere, there's greed and corruption everywhere. Justice is in short supply and so are the basic things that people need to

survive. And yet even if we don't pay attention to the big evils that play out on the international scene—or even on the local scene, for that matter—we only have to look at the struggles that we have ourselves and that we share with our family and friends to keep away from sin and to do good. Hate is easy; love is hard. Paul knew it. The Roman Christians knew it. We know it.

Paul tells the story of Creation in the book of Romans, but he tells it as Israel's story. We don't have time to run through the whole book this morning, but Paul's point is that the whole Creation is enslaved in the same sort of way that Israel was in Egypt. And right there we get a glimmer of hope. Because God was involved in that Egyptian exile from beginning to end. He had a purpose. Remember, when Israel went down to Egypt—we read about that in the story of Jacob and Joseph—the Lord arranged for Joseph to become a slave in Egypt so that through him he could rescue his people. Egypt started out good for Israel. When things turned around under a new king who enslaved Israel, it wasn't because the Lord had ceased to be good and it wasn't because the Lord was no longer in control. No. We learn later that the Lord allowed the Israelites to become slaves in Egypt so that he could then manifest his glorious sovereignty to everyone—to Israel in rescuing her and to the Egyptians by showing his power over her false gods and over her mighty horses and chariots. In the Exodus, the Lord marked Israel forever as the people he had freed from slavery, people to whom he had given a new life. That became their national identity, celebrated every year in the Passover.

In all of that Paul is working up to his point here. As the Lord allowed Israel to fall into bondage to Egypt, so he has allowed his good Creation to be subjected to death and decay. We may look around and wonder if things are hopeless. Every time one war ends

and we see peace break out another war begins somewhere else. We work hard to lift this group out of poverty, but then that group over there falls into it. We cure one disease only to have two new ones crop up. Isaiah wrote about a day when the lion will lie down with the lamb and we look around us and wonder if that's ever going to happen.

And Paul assures us: Yes, it's for real. This is God's promise. No matter how bad things are, this is still his good Creation and he has promised to put everything to rights. Even as he cast Adam and Eve from the garden he was promising them that he would one day overcome sin and restore everything to the way it should be. Genesis shows things going from bad to worse. It shows us humanity losing even the very knowledge of God and sinking into paganism and idolatry. But then it tells us how God came to Abraham and established a covenant with him. The Lord promised that through Abraham and his family he would restore not only humanity, but all of Creation and here Paul reminds us what that means, what it looks like and why the Creation itself would long for it to happen.

Again, we need the big picture—we need to remember where things started. In Genesis we read that the Lord created human beings to be his image bearers. What does it mean to bear God's image. Well, consider that Israel's pagan neighbours built great stone temples and then placed images of their gods in them. Those images represented the gods' rule or sovereignty over the land and people. Genesis uses the same languages and imagery, except that in Genesis it's the Lord himself who builds his own temple—the cosmos—and instead of placing an image of himself carved in stone or gold in it, he creates human beings, to live in his presence in the temple, but also to rule his creation justly and wisely—to have dominion and to subdue Creation in his name. That's what it meant for humanity to

bear God's image: to be his stewards, the priests of his temple. But then we chose to rebel. As Paul writes in Romans 1, we chose to worship the Creation instead of the Creator. We subjected the Lord's good creation to corruption.

Now, in light of that, it should make sense when Paul writes that Creation is longing for the day when our inheritance is revealed. That's the day when Creation will be set free from the corruption we brought on it. That's the day when we, Creation's stewards will be restored and renewed and put back in charge, reigning with Jesus. Again, think back to Israel. He chose and called her, he rescued her, he made her his people, he sent her to the nations to bring healing and restoration. But she rebelled and she rejected her mission. And yet the Lord didn't give up and he didn't change his plan to redeem his Creation through Israel. He simply sent a faithful Israelite—he sent Jesus. And Jesus not only redeemed Israel by dying in her place, he established a new Israel in his own person, a new people to be a light to the nations—this time equipped by the Holy Spirit.

This is what Paul is getting at in verse 23. It's not just the Creation that groans in eager longing:

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.

The Lord hasn't given up on his Creation any more than he gave up on Israel. Creation is eagerly waiting for its rightful stewards to be set right. On that great day the Lord will make all things new and restore his redeemed people to their—to our—rightful place as good, wise, and just rulers of Creation—as the faithful priests of his temple. This is what it means for our glory to be revealed. The big picture, the story of redemption, reminds us that this was

how it was supposed to be from the beginning. And so we groan and we wait eagerly too. We live in the mess we've made here in the world. We live with sin and with sickness and with death, and yet we live in hope, knowing that what God has begun in Jesus he will one day complete and on that day his glory will be revealed to an extent we can't even imagine.

And, Paul writes, we can hope because our God has given us the firstfruits of his new creation. He's given a down payment on what he has promised. The present age and its rulers have been decisively defeated by Jesus at the cross and at the empty tomb and God's new age has been inaugurated. Jesus is ascended to his throne. He is Lord. He truly is God's King. He's given us his Spirit—Paul describes the Spirit here as the firstfruits—and that's because we live in the overlap between these two ages, these two kingdoms. The Jews brought the firstfruits of the harvest—usually sheaves of grain harvested at the very beginning of the season—as offerings to God. They offered them in good years and even in bad years in faith that God would provide the rest of the harvest. And so the Spirit is the sign of hope for us. The life he gives to us here and now is a reminder that encourages our faith and hope in the resurrection and the new creation to come. We groan and we sigh, we wait longingly in eager expectation, but our hope is certain because God is faithful and keeps his promises. The prophet Habakkuk wrote that one day the glory of the Lord will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea. Brothers and Sisters, when that seems impossible, we only need remember the cross of Jesus, his empty tomb, and his gift of the Holy Spirit.

But our faith is not a complacent faith. We haven't been redeemed by Jesus and given the gift of the Spirit so that we can retreat into a sort of personal holiness or private piety while we wait for Jesus to return. Not at all. Jesus has inaugurated this new age in his

resurrection and somehow someday the making new that began in his resurrection will encompass all of Creation and you and I are called, in the power of the Spirit, to embody that renewing work here and now. How is Habakkuk's prophecy going to be fulfilled? How does the knowledge of the glory of the Lord spread to cover the earth? Brothers and Sisters, that's *our* mission. We're called to proclaim to the world the Good News that Jesus is Lord and that his kingdom is here and now. Our mission is to call the world to repentance and faith. But don't forget: We are also called to *live out* repentance and faith in our lives in such a way that we lift the veil on the kingdom and that we give a glimpse to the world of what heaven on earth looks like. So far as we are able to do so today, we are called to exercise the good dominion that was given to Adam—we are called to be stewards of God's temple, of his Creation. Jesus, the second Adam, has led the way for us here. In his earthly ministry he made his Father's new creation known in practical ways to the people around him and so should we. In a world full of sin we should be visible in seeking after holiness. In a world full of war and injustice, we should be visible and at the forefront working for peace and justice. In a world full of hurting and sickness, we should be seeking to make the healing ministry of Jesus known. In a world full of anger and hate, we should be working for forgiveness and reconciliation.

If you're like me you might get discouraged thinking about the mission Jesus has given us. It seems overwhelming. The world is so broken and so dark. It doesn't seem like anyone is watching and no one wants to listen. Sometimes it seems like you have to be a Peter or a Paul—someone important or high profile—to make a difference for the kingdom. But Friends, never forget that for every St. Paul or St. Peter, there were thousands of ordinary saints manifesting Jesus in their ordinary lives, proclaiming the

Good News, and building the kingdom right where they were. We fulfil Jesus' calling to us as we raise covenant children to walk with him in faith and to live the values of his kingdom. We fulfil Jesus' calling when we work for peace and reconciliation with our neighbours, in our workplaces, and in our schools. We fulfil Jesus' calling when we forgive as we have been forgiven. We fulfil Jesus' calling when we love the hard-to-love people around us, knowing that we ourselves are hard-to-love too, but that Jesus loved us enough to die for us. We fulfil Jesus' calling when we sacrifice ourselves, our rights, our prerogatives, our time, and our treasure in order to make Jesus and his love known. In *everything* we do, we should be seeking to give to this groaning and suffering world foretastes of God's glory, of God's new creation.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, as we asked earlier in the collect we ask again for grace that to pass through the trials of this life without losing the things of eternal importance. Remind us that the suffering we experience cannot begin to compare with the glory to be revealed to us. Remind us always of the suffering that Jesus endured for our sake that in love and gratitude we might suffer too for the sake of making him known. And as we think of Jesus' death and resurrection and as we live the life given by your Spirit, fill us with hope and faith, knowing that the glory inaugurated in us today will one day be fully accomplished in our own resurrection and the restoration of all your Creation. Amen.