

March 7, 2010

“When God Shouts”

Sermon Text: Romans 8:18-27 (NIV)

Future Glory

18 I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. 19 The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. 20 For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. 23 Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? 25 But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

26 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. 27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

One of the ironies of pain and suffering is that it is the shortest route to God. When life goes wrong, everyone - Christians, agnostics, atheists, whatever - all look to God. C.S. Lewis wrote, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains.” It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world. The vast majority of us here this morning have had God shout at us. We have looked up and asked, “Why?” Then, we look back down here and look around. We ask “Why?” knowing in advance that the answer will not make the pain go away, but that knowing may allow us to endure the pain. We look to the context of our lives and try to connect the dots so to speak, to make sense of our suffering. We pray, “Just let this make some sense; then the pain may be pointing me to a greater good.”

It seems reasonable to expect enduring suffering to lead to some good, doesn't it? After all, we sometimes choose pain or suffering now for a reward in the future. I have friends and family who have chosen painful medical procedures, even when they are feeling no symptoms; to avoid the potential pain and suffering if they do nothing. The thinking is, “I can endure this pain now because there is a future payoff. I will avoid cancer. I will live longer.” The pain is then acceptable; this how we are wired.

But when the unexpected happens - we lose a job, our health fails, or a loved one dies suddenly - it is no surprise that we look for an explanation. We often first look to God when there is no apparent reason. Usually, we don't see or hear anything from Him, so we look back into the context of our own lives. “Is this my fault?” “What can I do to make sure this never happens again?” We demand an explanation and a higher purpose. If it is impossible to connect the dots, if there is just randomness, then there goes our faith.

This is a natural reaction. Jesus reacted this way on the cross; He cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus, who predicted His own death in Jerusalem and willingly made this sacrifice for us, asked a very human question. When He was in the middle of all that suffering, He needed reassurance. How much more then do we need reassurance? Mary and Martha asked “Why?” too. In effect they asked, “Jesus, why didn't You come before my brother Lazarus died? I know that the answer won't bring Him back or take away

the pain I feel, but if I know why You decided not to come right away, I can endure it. If You give me some answers, I think I can get through.” This need is in all of us.

The problem is our focus; we are twisted into being self-focused. When God shouts out to you or you find yourself looking to God because of unexplained or unexpected suffering, you drop your focus back down into the context of your own world and your life. The answer is not to be found there. I do the same thing; we want to connect the dots in the context of our lives.

God gives us the true context in the inspired Word of Holy Scripture. Remember: Knowing these truths does not remove the pain of the loss; but it gives us the context. We see that events in our lives are not meaningless and random. God is a God of order, not of chaos. We also have to know that we do not suffer in vain; God is not too busy to be bothered with us and our little problems. He is not asleep or indifferent to our pain. It can seem that way. I know people who have spent years trying to explain their suffering in the context of their own lives, always asking, “Why, God?” I don’t criticize them; it’s a natural perspective. But the answers they seek aren’t there.

God connects three big dots in Scripture that give us context for all our pain and suffering. It does not take the pain away; the answer is not emotionally satisfying. In other words, at the end of this sermon you aren’t going to say, “Now that I understand that, I don’t care that I’m suffering.” Whatever you are going through will still hurt; but knowing the correct context may help you endure. This is an explanation for us Christians. I can’t imagine facing life and its hardships without Christ. I have no idea how to relate to someone suffering through life without faith in the One True God. I don’t know how someone can put their life back together after a tragedy without the context of a heavenly Father and the promise of His Son who died for us. Outside the context of our discussion, life appears completely random.

Let’s look at chapter 8 of St. Paul’s letter to the Romans, starting with verse 18. Paul carefully takes us through the context for all our suffering. Here are the dots: *In the beginning, in the meantime, and in the end.*

“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” (Romans 8:18) Paul lost everything to follow Jesus; he knows about present suffering. Here St Paul is talking about the end. Now is bad, but it is nothing when compared to the future glory: ***“The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.”*** (Romans 8:19) Presently, all of creation, including us, waits for this future. Then Paul takes us back to the beginning to explain: ***“For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope...”*** (Romans 8:20)

Here is the first dot to connect. Creation was subjected to frustration, meaning depravity. In other words, at the beginning of the world we know, sin entered the world and God judged the whole world. He judged all of creation and the relationship between all created things. Sin entered the world; death followed sin; God judged creation because of it. Sin has reigned and had its way on earth ever since.

“...that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God..” (Romans 8:21) We are in bondage to decay. That’s why your back aches in the

morning; that's why I can't see like did before I turned forty. Since sin entered the world, everything is in bondage to decay.

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.” (Romans 8:22) You see, sin entered the world and it has been broken ever since. It's not just that your marriage might be broken; the whole world is broken. It's not just that your career is broken; it's not just that your child is rebellious; **THE WHOLE WORLD IS BROKEN**. Your problems are a manifestation of this condition. The world is groaning under the weight of sin. Sin entered the world; death reigns. We are born broken to a broken world.

“Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” (Romans 8:23) Holy Spirit comes to live in us in Baptism. God gives us a new spirit, but not a new body. Let's see what will come: ***“For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has?”*** (Romans 8:24) Sin entered the world; in the meantime we live in hope. ***“But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.”*** (Romans 8:25) Our take on living in this world of sin is to lean forward in hope, looking our final redemption, the time when our salvation will be complete.

“In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness.” (Romans 8:26) We are weak. Are you having trouble? Then you are normal! The Spirit is here for us. How can we pray? In some situations we are unable to pray because we see things in such a narrow way. We are born in this broken world; we don't have words. The Holy Spirit within us prays for us when we can only groan. Even when our faith fails, the Spirit holds us up. God knows that we face the consequences of sin, some of which we are directly responsible for, some of which we aren't. Here we are in the middle of life, in the middle of the struggle; He will not abandon us. In this meantime, God prays with us.

Now, we look to the end: ***“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”*** (Romans 8:28) Paul tells us God works in **all** things, whether they work out as we would have them work out or not. We have a purpose. That is not changed when things go wrong here; that is to be expected. God is constantly interceding for us.

When my son Ben was quite small, he was walking but not talking much yet. He stuck his little finger into a stamped miniature globe that used to hold a pencil sharpener. My wife tried to slip it off, but no way. The part was stamped so that the metal was turned inside the hole; that edge cut into the boy's finger when we tried to pull it off. We took him to the emergency room of the hospital; by the time we got there, the end of his finger was blue. The admitting nurse took us right in to see the doctor. The doctor checked out the situation and said, “I don't know what to do.” What do you suppose I was doing? Did it even occur to you that I would leave him at the door of the ER and tell him, “Good luck with this; I'm going to get a newspaper and a cup of coffee. And by the way, you shouldn't have put your finger in that thing in the first place”? If Ben could have asked, “Dad, why did this happen?” there would be two answers: The first answer would be, “Because you are

irresponsible.” The second, more accurate answer would be “Because I allowed you to have this thing.” But “Why?” doesn’t matter now; what matters is what is happening right now in the meantime. It may be interesting to explore those questions at some point; they are not critical right now. In that moment I instinctively did what any father would do. I did what your Heavenly Father does. I stayed right next to my son; I did not leave his side. I would have traded places with him if I could. Where did I learn that the best thing I could do for my son in his time of pain was to be as close to him as I possibly could? Where did I learn that? I knew that because the image of my heavenly Father is in my heart, just as it is in your heart. I held my son’s hand and looked him right in the eye while the doctor and the maintenance man took tin snips and cut that thing off his finger. In my inadequate human way, I was interceding for my son. I couldn’t take the pain away. I could not take his place, but I know he took some comfort knowing that I was with him. This is the pain that will make for a better future. Ben kept his finger; but in that moment there was pain.

The future doesn’t seem to matter when you are in pain now. But what matters right now is *in the meantime*. This is not an emotionally satisfying answer. I still don’t feel better about my unemployment, or my child’s rebellion, or my marriage that’s in trouble. There is no answer like that; but there is context. God is saying, “*There is purpose and there is a reason; I am still in control. In the meantime, I am with you.*”

Could God end all pain and suffering? Absolutely - Jesus showed us that glimpse of the future. But that is not for now. “In the meantime, I am with you.” Will God end pain and suffering? Absolutely. The whole Scripture points us to that. That is in the future. That is what we hope for in the meantime. That is when our adoption will be complete. That is what we look to. That is why people can say at the death of a loved one, “I know I will see them again some day.” We do not get that confidence by connecting the dots in our present circumstances. We have that confidence because we understand that *in the beginning* sin reigned, *in the meantime* God is with us, and *in the end* all things will be made new, all things will be made right. That is answer enough because that is the answer God has given us; rest in that in the meantime.