

Alive in the Spirit

Romans 8:12-25

¹² So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—
¹³ for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" ¹⁶ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

¹⁸ I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰ for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

A popular saying goes, "What you see is what you get." One of those wise sayings that occupy the space we call common sense; it is usually uttered as a way to ensure that expectations do not get out of hand. It is often a helpful vaccine against disappointment, the counsel of realism against the foolishness of fantasy.

Oddly enough, such out-of-hand expectations, disappointment with the way things are, and fantastic foolishness are appropriate to the life of faith Paul describes in chapter 8 of Romans. The children of God are heirs to a future beyond our sight. What we will get is *not* what we now see.

What do we see? For Paul, speaking to the church in Rome, made up of Jews, proselytes, and other non-Jews, many of whom were not native to Rome, the church was mixed across social strata, drawing largely from lower classes, including slaves and freed persons; what they saw and what we see includes the "sufferings of this present time" (v. 18). The sufferings of Paul's day could be enumerated best by a historian, but what Paul proclaims also has relevance to us,

as it is good to attend to the "sufferings of *this* present time"—right now, right here. Where do we begin? With the travail of the creation, whose ice caps are melting due to the overheated consumption of self-centered and selfish human beings? With the last cries of species as they become extinct and disappear from the planet? By current estimates, up to one-fifth of all current living species will be extinct in thirty years and these are just a few of the sufferings of the whole creation, but what of the human race? We know the number of children dying of malnutrition is staggering. Our imagination reels at the picture of mothers and fathers unable to provide enough food to keep their children from withering away before their eyes. It is more than we can stand to see; when the images appear on our television screen, we reach for the remote to make them go away.

We do not need to leave our own houses to see the suffering of the present time. Ralph Waldo Emerson said it well: "Every roof is agreeable to the eye until it is lifted; then we find tragedy and moaning women and hard-eyed husbands." Things that appear to be well so often have troubling currents underneath. Simply think of the people you know personally who victims of mistreatment are and recall the stories of abuse, chronic illness, loneliness, and despair, frequently spoken of only in hushed tones, if at all. The "me too" and "black lives matter" movements only scratch the surface of the pain and suffering going on almost in plain sight.

What we see, while surely not all bad, is bad enough. "The way things are" contains enough pain and suffering to make us "groan inwardly" (v. 23). Even if we are optimistic and see the glass as half full, it is still a long way from a cup running over.

Paul speaks here of hope and being alive in the Spirit. Hope is rooted in an ability to see what we do not yet see. Hope and being alive in the Spirit is anticipating an inheritance that has not yet been received. As Paul puts it: "we are

children of God, and if children, then heirs" (v. 16-17). Hope for a "glory about to be revealed to us" (v. 18) does two important things.

First, it creates the sense of contrast between what is hoped for and the present state of affairs—what we get. This contrast causes disquietude. Disquietude expresses itself in groaning: expressing the pain of experiencing the negative, the way things are not supposed to be, but the way things in fact are. The one who hopes hurts. The one who hopes has a restless heart. The one who hopes sees what we get, what is in front of us, and is disappointed.

Karl Marx warns that religion with its fantasies drugs those who suffer and perpetuates their plight. Marx, though, is only partially right. Being alive in the Spirit and being one who hopes does not necessarily escape the suffering of the present time. In fact, in some instances the one who hopes may be the only one with the courage to endure the suffering of the present. This may be what Paul means when he says, "We wait for it with patience" (v. 25). Patience is not the same thing as acquiescence. Patience in this sense is not satisfied with the present but lives toward a future promised by God.

Second, being alive in the Spirit we have hope that fuels an imagination for the way things ought to be. Hope—hope for things that are not yet but are promised to us—empowers us who hope to confront the evils of this age, knowing their way is not the final way. We who hope are inspired to work in the present for things to get better in the present. In fact, the word "inspired" literally means "to have the Spirit."

Although Paul indicates that "hope that is seen is not hope" (v. 24), he also indicates that we "have the first fruits of the Spirit" (v. 23). It is important to hold these two together. If hope is only for something beyond our imagination, beyond our seeing, then it can easily become a flight of fantasy. It is like "pie in the sky, or

sweet by and by," and feeds the sort of escapism of which Marx speaks and against which the saying "What you see is what you get" warns.

Christian hope is not pie in the sky; it is hope rooted in what Paul calls "the first fruits of the Spirit" (v. 23). These first fruits mean that to be alive in the Spirit and in Christ we already have come to know the power of life over death. We already know freedom. We already know love. We have tasted the first fruits, and they have whetted our appetite for the final banquet. We do have out-of-hand expectations. Because we know the first fruits, we rejoice at the loving, the living, and the freedom of being alive in the Spirit. We hunger for more, and we cry out wherever love is absent, life is shortened, and freedom is taken away. The church of Jesus Christ is the community of sisters and brothers who live in anticipation of a new birth of freedom, a new day of loving, and an inheritance of life abundant.

David M. Greenhaw

Paul said: "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you" (v. 11). We are alive in the Spirit and therefore are children of God. Being alive in the Spirit gives us Christian freedom and having the name of God to call upon in time of trouble, and so we cry, "Abba! Father!" (v. 15).

The scriptures says if we are children, then we are heirs, "joint heirs with Christ" (v. 17). With our Christian freedom we also share in Christian suffering, but it is "not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us" (v. 18). We have this inheritance by faith, not by sight. Like the children who have become heirs, the creation, with us, waits for its new birth, since heirs have the promise of their inheritance, but have not received it yet. For in hope we were saved. Hope means our lives lean forward to what is coming to pass, but we do not yet see it. "We wait for it with patience" (v. 25), not because the inheritance comes from us,

but because it comes from the God who did not spare his only begotten Son.

Steven D. Paulson

Let us be alive in the Spirit...AMEN!

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).