

Creation Eagerly Longs

Romans 8:12-25

Do you know that you are an heir? When many of us think of an heir we think of little prince George of Great Britain who just turned one year old and may someday become king if the monarchy lasts that long. Or like me, you hope that we will be the heir of some fortune left to us by some distant and unknown relative. We want what our heritage has to give us...whether that is wealth, position, education, or health. However there is more to being an heir than what you get, but also what you give to others.

One of the major themes of Romans 8:12-25 is that of identity: who we are, now that we have accepted God's gracious gift of Jesus the Messiah, and what our life looks like. God has raised Jesus from the dead, demonstrating definitively that nothing can separate us from God's love, companionship, and community. We have experienced God's reign, the inauguration of a new era of hope and possibility in which we, Jesus' followers, are to be a sign, witness, and foretaste of what is to come.

At the same time, we live in the "not yet." While God has broken into our lives and creation, God's reign is not fully manifest. Sin or separation from God is evident in our world in so many ways, and it is often easier to focus on the disturbing events in the daily paper, on the television news or the Internet than on the ways God is working, through the Spirit, in our lives and world. It is easy to become discouraged. For Paul, what we see includes the "sufferings of this present time" (v. 18). Paul and the Roman church had it bad, but we have 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.

We could begin with the whole creation, but what of the human race? The number of children dying of malnutrition is staggering. The 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. If we took a poll in this small congregation and we would hear stories of abuse, chronic illness, loneliness, and despair. We would speak of these only in hushed tones, if at all. 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 we see the glass as half full, it is still a long way from a cup running over.

So, how do we interpret what we are experiencing? Not as punishment from God, as the absence of God, or as proof that the Messiah had not yet come. Suffering in no way negates the glory, truth, and promise of the resurrection. Rather, suffering offers evidence that we, as Christians, are in fact already united with Christ. Just as we pray the prayer of Christ, so we suffer the suffering of Christ. As part of God's family, we are subject to the same rejection of the world. N. T. Wright proclaimed: "The road to the inheritance and the path to glory lies along the road of suffering." The road ultimately, however, leads to glory; of this, Paul tells us, we must not lose sight. Indeed, the whole creation waits with eager longing for this glory to be revealed. It is like a woman in labor, who cannot wait for the pain to be over but, even more, cannot wait to meet the

long-awaited child about to be born. Here, in this most human experience, suffering and hope are not contradictory, but inseparably interwoven. Paul's claims are expansive: everything will be redeemed—all of creation, our bodies, the substance of this earth. Everything that fell with Adam's fall will be set free by Christ's redeeming work.

Our hope is rooted in an ability to see what we does not yet see. Hope is anticipating an inheritance that has not yet been received. As Paul puts it: "we are children of God, and if children, then heirs" (vv. 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 groaning: expressing the pain of experiencing the negative, the way things are not supposed to be, but the way things in fact are. Although we hope we hurt. Although we hope we have restless hearts. Although we hope we experience this life and its disappointments. Although we experience disappointments, we have hope and the courage to endure the suffering of the present. This may be what Paul meant when he said, "We wait for it with patience" (v. 25) for a future promised by God.

Second, hope fuels an imagination for the way things ought to be. Hope empowers us who hope to confront the evils of this age, knowing their way is not the final way. As we hope we 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 or "pie in the sky, in the sweet by and by." Christian hope is not pie in the sky; it is hope rooted in what Paul calls "the first fruits of the Spirit" (v. 23). This metaphor of the first fruits means that 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. Because we know the first fruits, we rejoice at the loving, the living, and the freedom we have in Christ. 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**

As Children of God, we are driven by the Spirit of God, not a spirit of slavery. We have freedom from condemnation, from sin, from death. The Church of Rome was 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. For Jews, slavery brought to mind the exodus, when God led God's people to freedom. Not only are we, as Christians, to understand ourselves as "free" from our former slavery; we are made part of a new family by adoption, so much so that we may call God "Abba! Father!" (v. 15). It invites the image of a relationship with God that is not only familial, but intimate and familiar: led by the Spirit of God, we are children of God. For Jews, Israel is God's son, his "firstborn son," who is freed in the exodus from Egypt (Exod. 4:22) and enjoys a unique relationship with God. Now the exodus, the essential story of the salvation of God's people, is opened to become the covenant story for everyone led by the Spirit of God. Just as God led God's people through the wilderness to freedom, so the Spirit leads all of God's children to a life of freedom. Our Christian freedom is having the name of God to call upon in time of trouble. The word says: If we are children, then we are heirs, "joint heirs with Christ" (v. 17). Before we run off with the family farm, joint heir means you will suffer like him, going through death, not around it. However, Christian suffering is "not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us" (v. 18). **Steven D. Paulson**

As Paul closes this passage he reminds us what he had previously said. He began with suffering, patience, hope, and love. In 5:3-5 he wrote, "We boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

In the meantime, while we wait, we live in the already-and not-yet, where here-and-now and there-and-then overlap and intersect. We Christians fall far from God's intention when they hold one without the other. We have the first fruits of the Spirit—here, already—and we groan for redemption, which is not yet complete. If we fail to see the redemption that is already here, we will lose heart. If we fail to understand that there is more glory to be revealed to us, we will have lost hope. If we hope, however, for what we do not yet see, we will wait with the tension of eager patience. Suffering and hope hold no contradiction, for they are deeply connected in Christ, the One whose glory we have seen, the One who gives this creation life. **Karen Chakoian**

We must learn to live faithfully in the present while, like Abraham and Sarah, waiting in the hope of God's promises. Paul tells us that if we are led by the Spirit of God we are children of God because we have "received a spirit of adoption" (v. 15). Adoption is an act of grace. The child who does not biologically belong to a family is embraced by that family and becomes a rightful heir to the family's riches. The fact that God has chosen us and incorporated us into a Christ-shaped family composed of men, women, and children from every country, race, and class is powerful indeed. Our adoption creates an intimacy that enables us, like Jesus, to call God "Abba" or Father.

Last week some of us spent 5 days in Vacation Bible School. When we first started planning the goal was to get the 5 Disciples of Christ churches of the Flint area to work together and work with about 65 youth. God gave Jennifer Snipes this vision of hope. Jennifer directed the planning and singing; Ann provided the live music; Linda taught

the adults; Patty helped with the pre-kindergarten class; Bob and Trudy taught the primaries; Jean and Sandy staffed the snacks. Pastors and members of the other congregations taught, directed the puppet show, did storytelling, crafts, registration, provided items for the Saturday picnic and helped us prepare the great room for worship on Sunday. We saw over one hundred youth and adults learning about God's love, obedience, choices, and true friendship. We experienced five churches working together. The adults have established friendships and are already looking forward to how we can work more closely together to minister to our youth. It was hard work and many of us were exhausted, but many were blessed through this ministry.

Living as God's children demands our complete allegiance, our whole selves. We are, as Paul instructs us in Romans 12:1, to present our "bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is [our] spiritual worship." We are not to be "conformed to this world," but "transformed by the renewing of [our] minds" (v. 2) so that we can discern God's will and leading. In Romans 12 Paul lays out in detail what life in the Spirit looks like. It is not just about being nice on Sunday, but about obedience in the whole of our lives. We are to love what is genuine and hate what is evil, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer, offer hospitality to strangers, bless those who persecute us, and, perhaps hardest of all, "live peaceably with all" (v. 9, 12, 13, 14, 18). **Blair Alison Pogue** The creation is eagerly longing for us to do our part!

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