



“People of Hope”

a sermon by

Kathleen A. Crowe

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

November 10, 2004

Our Scripture lesson for the day comes from Romans 8:22-27. Paul is going strong in his Gentile mission when he writes the letter to the Romans. The letter would likely have been read in a public forum where previously expelled Jewish Christians were struggling to assimilate into a Roman culture of Gentile Christians about 50 years after Christ's death. Paul struggled to help these believers to live alongside one another peaceably and to look to the gospel proclamation of Christ's resurrection as God's solution to problems of schism in the community, poverty, and grief. It is in this climate of considerable social, cultural, and religious turmoil that Paul pens these words: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; 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. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." Here ends our reading. This is the Word of the Lord: Thanks be to God.

Many of you within this congregation will appreciate the fact that Paul likens the pain and suffering of our present time with that of a woman in labor. I myself have witnessed nine births- albeit through a 32 inch television screen in the safety of a women's studies class...and through the cracks of my fingers at that. But what I saw of it was, believe me, ample representation of the struggle involved. But you noble women who have experienced this event first hand can perhaps in a unique way sympathize with the particular quality of pain that Paul is referring to here. From what I understand of it, it is both a wonderfully traumatic and enthralling experience- for in the midst of suffering there is an ever-present if yet unseen hope for what is to arrive- *a new life*. It is this painful period of expectation of new life, that time between the first contraction and delivery, that Paul is presenting here in our text today. This particular expectant pain is experienced by all of us, in fact, by all of creation as we await our adoption- the redemption of our bodies. In essence, it is the pain that we experience as we toil on this earth in anticipation of Christ's return- when God's kingdom will be brought to fullness and we will be perfected and free from this mortal coil. Paul's theology is complex but his message is simple, and worthy of recalling just about every day.

You do not have to be a woman in labor to understand the kind of suffering within creation and in our very own bodies that Paul is describing here. In these times it seems you simply have to turn on the news, open your front door, or pick up the phone and you will know perhaps far too intimately for comfort what Paul means when he says that we groan inwardly as we wait for our adoption. Creation has been groaning in labor pains until now, and not only the creation but we- we within ourselves groan inwardly from the weight of what life often throws in our path. Contraction: Terrorist attacks and resulting war with no end in sight. Contraction: 500 knocks on the front door a year for something to eat. Contraction: Anti-Semitic and racist cd's circulating underground in our public schools. Contraction: another round of layoffs across the street. Contraction: sudden illness in the family or unexpected transitions. Contraction: person of

faith is confronted with amoral behavior at work. Confused priorities, depression, disillusionment. The list goes on and on and on. But Paul does not leave his reader lingering in despair, floundering in the tensions of leading a Christian life in a fallen world. For the suffering he describes, the labor we experience is not without its reward. For in the midst of international conflict, through the pain of grief, from the depths of alcoholism and workaholism, at the heartache of broken relationships, in our desperate attempts understanding the world around us, on the twisting paths of difficult decisions and on the edge of uncertainty there is *hope*. In the depths of our pain Paul hands over the gospel, "For in hope we were saved." In *hope* we were saved by Jesus Christ- who fulfilled for all believers the promises of God by defeating death and rendering us a people of hope, not of fear- hope in what has already been accomplished, and hope in what is still yet to come. So now we too wait in expectant hope that our labor in this life is not in vain. In the ambiguities of this world and the aching of our hearts, we continue to wait for that which is unseen but certain: the fulfillment of the promises of our God.

My husband and I were traveling through Rhode Island recently on a cold winter morning during a time of great uncertainty in our lives. There were questions surrounding the security of his job and I was struggling perhaps far too much to discern where the next step of my vocation was to lead me. We were confused and anxious, and were returning home after visiting a city for which we had held high hopes to be a future home but that simply did not feel right once we visited. Another 'no' from God. In our disheartened state we decided to take a detour to a small island town to take in the beauty of the New England coastline in hopes of lifting our spirits. Just one bridge to cross- one that promised to be a scenic journey in itself, providing a birds eye view of several coastal towns and a vast waterway filled with ships. You can imagine what we were envisioning as we followed signs to this bridge- dark waves crashing into craggy rocks, quaint New England homes dotting the shoreline while ships sought their bounty in the waters, all under the watchful eye of a towering lighthouse. But these fairy tail visions were dashed when we mounted the massive bridge and found ourselves immediately encased in a fog so dense, we could not see the thick supporting cables of the bridge in front of us for more than five or eight feet at a time. Our hopes for scenic enlightenment quickly evolved into a quest for survival as we slowly drove on, combating the eerie feeling that was closing in fast upon us as we could see nothing beyond the side of the bridge, nothing of what lay far below, nothing of the ground we had covered or of the road ahead, just one small portion of bridge at a time. With a nervous laugh my husband commented, "I'm just going to have to trust that this bridge is intact on the other end."

And that is when we fully understood what was really happening on that bridge. For on that bridge and in more ways than one we wanted nothing more than to see the bounty below that we knew was out there. We wanted nothing more than to identify clearly the path on which we were traveling so that we could see perfectly the future before us, the condition of the road ahead, to set our sights on the security waiting for us on the other side, and to control the speed with which we got there. But instead, we were relegated to hope. Resigned to resting in hope for that which was unseen, and exercising a work of faith in the fact that by God's grace, the bridge would be intact on the other side. We were forced to cast off all that we thought we knew about what we needed and to have hope that God would provide for us in ways beyond that which we could even imagine for ourselves. What was happening on that bridge in a way was the embodiment of

the journey of faith we all travel as we await for the redemption that Paul speaks of. For in this Christian life we do groan from within, faced with pain and uncertainty, with longing for answers, for a clear vision of our future, even of our present. But when we cannot see the road before us because the fog of doubt, anger, sorrow, or simply time clouds the way and Paul's hope seems like far too bitter a pill to swallow we are provided with a bridge to aid us along our journey in the Holy Spirit.

Paul writes, "The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for Words." We are not alone in our hope, it is not in isolation that we wait in faith, but it is backed by the work of Jesus Christ and with the Holy Spirit as our advocate that we are sustained in our faith and hope in the full assurance of God's faithful attention and presence. The Spirit is the bridge that links us intimately to God, helping us in our weakness, providing words when we have no voice, offering prayer when we cannot lift our hearts for the weight of our burdens, and guiding us in God's time to the fullness of creation. For through the Spirit, our bridge to the Holiest of Holies, though we groan in the present time, we glimpse the path of the Christian life set out before us and travel along in faith that there is completion and wholeness with God in Christ in all things. Paul himself is no stranger to suffering and knows what he asks when he commissions us to hope. He had seen the persecution of Christ's followers. The martyrdom of saints. The hunger in the stomachs and hearts of the church of Rome. And though he had never given birth, a woman in labor is the image he summons to connect us with the promises of God in Christ Jesus. Though we suffer the pain of contractions we labor as a people of hope because God's saving work has already been accomplished through the blood of Christ. Like a mother anticipating new life being born unto her so too do we anticipate the new life to come when God's kingdom is fulfilled and all of creation is redeemed from the fall. As the love for the child sustains the mother in her pain, the Holy Spirit sustains us in hope through faith, and when our vision of the future is obscured it bridges the distance between us and God by voicing our condition with sighs too deep for words and connecting us throughout eternity to our Savior.

In time the bridge that laid itself out in short segments before my husband and I yielded to the land, but not before a moment when the fog, as if by magic, lifted from the bridge and the small, beautiful fishing town spread out before us in all its coastal glory. We had arrived at the edge of uncertainty, and we arrived restored, having been supported by the sturdy cables of the bridge, and sustained by the promise of the unseen. And what was promised was even more beautiful than we could have imagined, and was well worth the wait.