

WORSHIP

Sermon | 7.19.2020



Already...

The Reverend Pen Peery

Romans 8:18-30

Seven weeks ago we began a summer sermon series on God's covenants – or promises – to and with God's people. Through these weeks we've focused on Adam and Eve, on Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Moses, King David, and – of course – on Jesus Christ.

Today Lorenzo and I are going to focus on the promise of God that comes after the gift of Christ's resurrection.

We'll be preaching from two different parts of Scripture – both that take place in the years after Christ's resurrection when the "church" was a new and fragile idea.

The frame that Lorenzo and I will be using as we talk about God's promise in light of resurrection is a concept we see in the writings of the Apostle Paul.

Paul was a fervent disciple of Jesus whose mission was to start and nurture and challenge the earliest expressions of the church. Paul's letters to the various churches he visited (or started) were reflections of the questions that the early



followers of Jesus carried with them when they came to worship: what does saying that Jesus is Lord mean for my life and my behavior? Who is included in Christ's family?

But perhaps the biggest question people had was, "now that resurrection has happened, what comes next? What can we expect? When will the kingdom of God that Jesus talked about be realized? And why have those things not happened?"

When he was teaching me how the Apostle Paul answered those kinds of questions, my seminary professor and Pauline scholar, Charles Cousar drew a diagram on the chalk-board. There were two, circles that overlapped a bit that I remembered from middle school math were called a Venn Diagram. Dr. Cousar shaded in the place where the circles overlapped and drew a cross on top. "This is where we are living now," Dr. Cousar said. "The circle to the left was the world before the resurrection. The circle to the right is the world that is to come."

That was Paul's answer: the promise of resurrection is already...and not yet.

Already...not yet. It's an answer to the question that followers of Jesus have been asking for a long time – as we continue to trust in a promise and live in a world that has yet to fully to resemble what we believe, one day, will be.

Our first Scripture is from Paul's letter to the church in Rome. It is his, personal testimony that describes how he lives with hope in the "already" even as



he longs for the “not yet.” I am reading from the eighth chapter of Romans beginning at verse 12. Listen with me for the Word of God.

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

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 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.

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.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also



predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

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I don't claim to know a whole lot about labor pains.

If my wife and the mother of my four children were in the sanctuary this morning, she would be nodding her head. "That's true, honey, you don't much about labor pains AT ALL!"

My personal experience of labor pains was sympathetic...hopefully, empathetic.

But even as an observer, I do know what it is to wait for new life. To long for it. To work for it. To struggle for it. And to keep perspective – no matter what is happening in the present – that when that new life emerges...and when you can see her, or hold him, and smell the top of their sweet little heads...that it will be have been worth it.

The Apostle Paul didn't know a whole lot about labor pains, either.

To be honest, if you read other parts of Paul's letters, you might wonder if he knew much about women.

But what Paul did know – from his own personal, transformational



experience – is that in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God’s promised day had begun.

The Kingdom that God promised and that Jesus preached about was at hand.

Paul was aware that the world did not yet mirror what God intended. In his own life, he had experienced persecution, injustice, ridicule, scorn. He lived in a time where those whom Jesus called “blessed” seemed hopelessly outmatched by the powerful. He knew that suffering was real.

It’s not that Paul dismissed any of that – nor, that he thought we could just ignore the problems of the present as we waited for God to complete creation. No, Paul just had perspective.

About the joy that awaits us in the future.

And about the fact that we have already experienced God’s promise in the present...which can give us hope, and courage, and strength.

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I don’t know about you, but it’s pretty easy for me to get lost...and overwhelmed...by what is wrong. By what is wrong with my own life. With the world.

It’s easy for me to get weighed down by being witness to suffering – knowing people who struggle with economic and employment insecurity, or with sickness and disease, or with mental health, or with discrimination.



And I was susceptible to going down those roads before a global pandemic.

Yet, in these moments, I believe the place where the Scripture challenges us is to not forget what is right. And what is good. And where there is occasion for joy.

It's been a while since I have held a baby by our baptismal font – and heard this congregation stand up on these squeaky floorboards to make a promise to the child and their parents that they will love and support them as members of Christ's family. I miss that sound – and hearing your collective voices. But that's a promise that is eternal. We are claimed. Loved. Cherished. Saved.

Already.

Stories of division might make the headlines, but what I have felt among friends and colleagues and neighbors is a hunger for connection and change. I have watched relationships once strained become strong again. I have seen hearts soften. I have witnessed repentance and energy for the continued work that needs to be done. And I am mindful that through Jesus Christ, we are – each one of us – given the ministry of reconciliation.

Already.

It is true that things feel uncertain and that the days ahead seem unclear – by any measure – whether in our own homes, our community, our nation, or our world. None of us have ever been in this moment before – but those who are in



the great cloud of witnesses have navigated uncertainty, and change. They have lived and prayed their way through hardship. They cast their burdens on a God who had promised – again and again and again – to be faithful, and present, and true. These are their stories. They can be trusted. They can give us strength for whatever may come. Because, as my friend and brother said a few months ago, we might not know what tomorrow holds, but we know who holds tomorrow.

Already.

Instead of being overwhelmed, Paul encourages us to keep perspective: to point to our experience of God’s promise – and to trust that these occasions for joy are but a foretaste of what it is come.

Paul knew that this perspective could fuel our strength and our hope for this present moment – and for all the ways that God continues to call his people to participate in the new creation that is yet to be revealed.

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Congressman and Civil Rights leader John Lewis died yesterday. He was known as a tireless advocate for justice – from the Edmond Pettus bridge in Selma to the halls of government.

What fueled his pursuit, however, was the promise of God’s tomorrow. A man of faith, who went to American Baptist Seminary, and who his family called “preacher,” Lewis offered these words for those who held onto the same, eternal promise that guided his life: “Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be



optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, a year. It is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever, be afraid to make some noise and get into good trouble, necessary trouble. We will find a way to make a way out of no way.”

Its what God has done for God’s people – already.

And what God will continue to do.

