

Sermon – 7th Pentecost
Romans 8:18-27 & Matthew 24:3-14
July 23, 2017
“St. Louis Glory”

Marriage and parenthood are wonderful blessings. For me as a preacher they also give perspective on how NOT to approach certain subjects from the pulpit. Witnessing the birth of my two of my daughters before my ordination taught me to never, ever use the analogy of childbirth as a sermon illustration. As part of the male species I know I have a role in the propagation of the human race but not the main one! Men - we don't know how it feels, even if it sounds like it feels awful! No attempt to encourage our wives to engage in “purposeful breathing” alters the reality that childbirth is their experience and not ours. Henceforth I will make no attempt at “silver lining” theology by reference to childbirth, as in “*well, it is a miracle the gift of a child, so it's all worth it*” or its flip side – “*well you know, there are worse things.*”

Nevertheless, the Apostle Paul – he is an Apostle after all - does what I pledge never to do – make a theological point - a large one at that – by analogy of childbirth. Romans 8:18 says “*We know the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now.*” It's one thing for Paul to use an experience he never had to illustrate the agonizing state of the world – quite another to use childbirth as an analogy immediately after saying human suffering isn't even worth comparing to the glory that will come out of it. “*Well you see, when all is said and done a glorious new birth comes out of this - and besides the suffering of the world could be worse – and it's not even worth putting on a scale next to the glory of the life to come.*”

Neither of which are terribly satisfactory explanations for the distressing state of our world. To make matters worse Paul insinuates that suffering and injustice, of which childbirth and labor pains serve as his illustration, are something God imposed on the creation. Romans 8:22 says “*For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it – in hope.*” How else to read this phrase without the unsettling conclusion that God planned for things to go awry. How can this be?

We must backtrack a bit. In Romans chapter 7 Paul writes a personal confession and lament for his culpability in his and the world's dire predicament. In Romans 8:20 he calls human effort at righting things – futile. It's one thing to say things have gotten off track but quite another to suggest God may have sabotaged the tracks on which creation's train rides. But lest we get off on the wrong track here, Paul is not accusing God of malfeasance or faulty engineering of the world – chapter 7 is still in force for Paul - our suffering is only and always that - ours. But does Paul change his conviction that as distressing as our distress is it does not measure up to what lies ahead – and that is how his analogy of childbirth does work.

The glory of God is going to be revealed, and it is not only precisely what the world needs, it's what the world waits for in almost unbearable anticipation. There is something in store for us that we can't even imagine. I don't like to nitpick a bible passage, but bear with me a moment. Some translations of Romans 8:18 say the glory of God will be revealed “*to us*” – suggesting we are going to be spectators like we watch a fireworks display. Some translations say the glory will be revealed “*in us*” suggesting one day we'll be nice and pleased with ourselves.

Professor N.T. Wright, a contemporary translator of Romans, suggests in his book *“What Did Paul Really Say”* that the best way to understand Romans 8:18 is by using the word *“for us.”* That may not seem like a big difference, glory revealed *“for”* rather than *“to”* or *“in”* us but it means we’re not watching, we’re participating. That, Paul says is precisely what the world is waiting for – Christian men and women bringing to life what God will conceive in them and bring about *“for”* everyone an utterly new existence, a restored creation.

When Paul speaks of *“newness of life”* or *“the life to come”* in Romans, he is not thinking heaven someday but a new way today. In Romans 6:5, Paul says *“if you’ve been buried with Christ through your baptism, then just as the glory of the Father raised him to new life, you have – not will – you have risen with Christ to walk in a new way of life.”* Our other lesson today - Matthew 24 – is an *“end times”* passage in which Jesus warns of terrible events in the world. Confusion, people claiming to be speaking for God but who do not, and the recurrence of wars, famines and natural disasters. Added to that will be enormously trying times for believers. Perhaps the worst thing is stated in Matthew 24:12 – apathy. Because of all this chaos – Jesus calls it *“lawlessness”* people’s love will give out -their hearts calloused or just worn out by it all.

Yet our Lord says, *“the one who endures to the end is saved.”* The glory of God is revealed *for* the world in Christians who never give up – and are determined to deliver that beautiful healthy baby called the kingdom of God. Week before last in St. Louis, eleven of us from this congregation went participated in something remarkable. The very fact there was for us a crisis nursery to sort diapers and baby clothes in, a housing center to tidy up apartments in preparation for the next abused woman and her kids to arrive at on a moment’s notice, and a summer camp to occupy young kids minds and bodies so their neighborhood’s poverty and crime wouldn’t – at least for a few hours, was ample testimony for us that *“the creation does groan.”*

But I tell you, the 50 or so other Christians we were with last week, from Michigan, Minnesota and St. Louis were all I needed to see to know that we from Calvary don’t all by ourselves *“anxiously wait for the revealing of the children of God”* - a phrase Paul uses to mean *“the world becoming what it was intended to be.”* If you ever get to St. Louis, you have to meet folks like Miss Velma, the retired teacher who organizes that summer camp and applies such an exquisite blend of tenderness and toughness on her kids. Or one of the most enthusiastic Christian anyone could meet – we called him *“Uncle Jarvis”* because he called most of us his nieces and nephews – a man from our host church who gave perpetual motion and infectious Christianity new definition.

If what we witnessed and participated in is the groaning of this world - as of childbirth – then with all due respect ladies, sign me up for childbirth classes! In St. Louis love has not grown cold, and so long as ours doesn’t either the glory of God is revealed – not fully – not yet – but the glimpse Christ’s church gives is evidence the wait will not disappoint – God has something amazing for us to see. AMEN