

LONGING FOR FREEDOM

Romans 8:18-27

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (Series A)

July 23, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The epistle lesson comes from *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, chapter 8, verses 18 through 27. In this scripture lesson, Paul teaches us to look beyond the momentary sufferings of life to the eternal glory of the new creation. Please stand as you are able for God's holy Word. From Romans 8, beginning at verse 18, we read in Jesus' name.

¹⁸ For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. ²³ And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

²⁷ And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

We live lives of longing. From the moment we're born, we want something more. It starts simple enough. A baby wants milk, sleep, and a clean diaper. But pretty soon, their longing becomes more ambitious. The baby wants to stand up, eat solid food, and play with cool toys. In short, the baby wants to be a toddler. Eventually, this longing is realized, but the new toddler is still not satisfied. What does she want now? Does she want to be a big kid? Kind of. That would be cool. But she's already looking beyond that. She wants to be a grown up, a fully-fledged grownup with a house, a car, and a family. So we spend our entire childhoods wishing that we weren't children. Part of it is that we think grownups have freedom to do whatever they want. But eventually, we grow up, and we realize that it's not really what we hoped for. The freedom we longed for doesn't actually exist. It's more responsibility than anything. I heard a wise person say, "Don't grow up. It's a trap." We get there, and we're still not satisfied. So we mourn for our lost childhood, but even if we could go back, we wouldn't, because then we would have to go through everything all over again. So we begin to long for new and different things. We long for a spouse and a family. And we may obtain those things, and those things are good. But the nagging longing doesn't go away. Maybe we long for a bigger house, a nicer car, or a better job.

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And those longings may be fulfilled, but we're still not satisfied. So after we experience a bit of adulthood, we long for retirement. And maybe we get there, but then we might be bored, or our bodies start to fail, or we worry that we might not have enough money to live for however long we're going to live. Finally, at the end of life, when we feel our bodies failing, we might catch just enough wisdom to realize the one thing we've been longing for this entire time, and it's not in this world. From the moment we're born, we long for the new creation.

Now I hope, by God's grace, that you experience contentment in this life. Contentment comes, not from finally getting everything we want, but from knowing the source of all good things. It comes from knowing that our heavenly Father loves us and provides for us. But even with this contentment, there is still a longing for something more. This is natural and good.

We long for something more because we know, in our consciences, that this world is not the way it's supposed to be. So our longing actually proves that there must be a good and gracious God who created us and intends for us to live in perfection. This might not be the proof that's going to convince everyone, at least not right away. But it's one of those where, if you think about it for a little while, you start to see how much sense it makes. So think about this. Why does a toddler grieve when his favorite toy breaks? Because that's not supposed to happen, and he knows it. Why do we grieve when people we love die? We grieve because we know that's not supposed to happen. Even if someone lives to be a hundred years old, if you love that person, you grieve. Compared to the way the world normally functions, a hundred years is longer than we're supposed to live. But we still grieve, because our consciences know this world is not the way it's supposed to be. Someone could live to be two hundred or three hundred years old, and we would still grieve.

I saw a TV show, so this is fictional, and a pastor was giving a funeral sermon. TV show funerals are really bad, by the way. He said, "Death is just a natural part of life. Our job is to accept it." That is just about the most anti-Christian thing you could possibly say. Death is not a natural part of life. Death and life are complete opposites; everybody knows that. And to call death "natural" flies in the face of whatever is left of the image of God in our consciences. Our consciences know that death is not natural. But we try to convince ourselves that it is, because we think that will make the pain go away. But the conscience knows better.

I can't tell you where the conscience is in the brain or the heart. But it's there, somewhere, in the mind of every person. It's the part of your mind or your heart that naturally understands the difference between right and wrong. It naturally knows how this world is supposed to be. And this is one of the most amazing things: without ever experiencing a perfect world, or even a better world, the conscience knows that this world is not the way it's supposed to be. How does it know this? If we've never experienced something else, how do our consciences know this world is not the way it's supposed to be?

Think about little kids. Kids experience theft about a dozen times a day, maybe more. They just spend their entire day stealing toys from each other. It happens so often that it should be the most normal thing in the world to them. But their conscience knows, at least when they're on the losing end of it, that theft is not right. And their parents don't need to tell them this. As soon as they have a toy stolen from them, they feel the wrongness of it in their core. Why? They've never experienced a just world, but they know this world is not just.

This is also what drives our obsession with politics. We know that this world is not the way it's supposed to be. And our hearts are captivated with longing for a better world. But why? We've never experienced this better world. What makes us think that it exists, or that it could potentially exist? We don't accept the current state of this world, and we never will, because our

hearts have a built-in longing for a better world, one that we have never experienced. We become obsessed with politics because we think that if this longing exists, then we must be able to create this better world. We can't. It's good and right to work for greater justice in the world. But we're never going to create the world our hearts long for. Our obsession with politics is just a misplaced longing for the new creation. Our hearts long for a better world, and our consciences know that it must be possible.

And this is why we grieve over death. This is the big one. We grieve because death is not supposed to happen ... ever. So it's okay to grieve. It's good. We are tempted to say some really bad things when we see something grieving. We tell them to accept it. We tell them that they'll get over it. These are terrible things to say. We say these things, because we want the other person to feel better. So it comes from a place of care and concern. So if someone says this to you, don't be upset with them. Hear their concern, but don't believe what they say. You don't have to accept death. You don't have to get over it. Whoever it is that you love and grieve for, they were not supposed to die. You have permission to grieve for the rest of your life.

Think about it this way: grief is a confession of faith. It is. We grieve because we have a built-in longing for a better world, one where death does not take the people we love. I suppose there's a difference between hopeless grief and hope-filled grief. Hopeless grief says, "They're gone forever, and nothing will ever be the way it's supposed to be." This is an incomplete confession. It only confesses that this world is not the way it's supposed to be, but it doesn't take the next step. Hope-filled grief says, "This world is not the way it's supposed to be, but God has promised a better world, where the injustice of death does not exist."

That's why we grieve. We know this world is not the way it's supposed to be. Even animals grieve over death. Dogs, and cats, and cows, and horses, and all kinds of animals grieve when their child or companion dies. It's not quite the same as it is with humans, who are created in the image of God, but even animals know this world is not the way it's supposed to be. The whole creation knows this world not supposed to be this way. St. Paul says, "The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God" (8:19), and, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now" (8:22).

Where does this longing come from? It is placed there by God. It proves to us that there must be a good and gracious God who loves us and created us for a better world. The longing has to come from somewhere. Unless God places that longing in our hearts, we would not feel the way we do.

Our sufferings make us long for a better world. And there are many diverse sufferings in this world: grief, loneliness, depression, despair, physical pain, persecution, hatred, shame, sin, and the list could go on. All of these diverse sufferings exist because of the fall into sin. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, fell into sin. Suffering and death began, and their sin, suffering, and death spread to all men. If you ever wonder, *Why would a loving God allow such pain in the world?* this is part of the answer. God did not introduce pain and evil into the world. It came when man followed the temptation of the devil. God is not the source of it. But that only answers the intellectual question of where it came from. It doesn't answer our longing for something better. And we still wonder why God would allow that to happen in the first place. So we still long for a better answer.

But a better intellectual answer is never going to satisfy, because this isn't really an intellectual problem. It's an existential problem. That is, it deals with our very existence, our

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being. The problem isn't just that we don't understand evil. The real problem is that we experience evil. That's what really bothers us.

So God's big answer is not an explanation, but a solution. God's answer is to redeem this creation from suffering. That's what Jesus is all about. God did not hold himself aloof from our suffering, but he came down into it. This is what we read about last week, in the passage just before this one: "[God sent] his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us" (8:3-4).

Instead of asking, "Why does God allow such suffering?" we should ask, "Where is God in the midst of suffering?" And the answer is, "Not far," because Jesus came down into our suffering. He experienced it all, and he suffered it all for us. He suffered for our sin, and it died with him, so that when he was raised from the dead, the sin was gone. This is God's real answer to our suffering. And with this sin gone, we have hope in the resurrection of the dead and life in the new creation. Just as Jesus was raised from the dead and gloriously transformed, we have hope that we will be raised at his return and transformed after his perfect image.

This is our hope. And when the Scriptures talk about Christian hope, it doesn't mean wishful thinking. Instead, it means a sure and certain hope. That's because this is God's hope. When man hopes for something, we don't really know how it's going to work out. But when God hopes for something, he does know. So it's not just a wish; it is his good and gracious will.

This is why God subjected the creation to futility. The world was broken by sin. God could have destroyed it all. But instead, he preserved the creation in its corrupted state with his plan to free it from corruption.

This is why Paul says, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (8:18). Yes, there are great sufferings in this world. And, for now, they feel like the biggest thing, because we haven't experienced anything else. But one day, the children of God will experience "the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (8:21). We will be set free from this corruption, and we will experience what we can only now hope for. We will know by experience that everything we suffer in this world is nothing compared to the glory to come. The glory to be revealed is so great, that our current sufferings will seem as nothing.

There is a world that we can't even imagine. It is a world where your body, despite its weakness and flaws now, and even in spite of death, will be resurrected and transformed into perfection. And our spirits, which are now plagued with sin and shame will be set free. And our consciences will be at peace, knowing that this is the world they have been longing for since before we knew what we wanted. The children of God, who trust in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, have a sure and certain hope in something better. For now, we live lives of longing. Then, we will live an eternal life of fulfillment. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.